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Adventure

Arthur O. Friel
Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur
Frank C. Robertson
Leonard H. Nason
Albert Richard Wetjen
George E. Holt
Raymond S. Spears

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JOHN KINGMAN, prospecting the Great American Desert, finds something that is more precious than gold, and his discovery leads to a savage little border war. "WATER," a novelette of the Far West, by E. S. Pladwell, complete in the next issue.

EMBITTERED by the loneliness of the African jungle and the memory of a past wrong, *Stewart* has just about decided to drink himself to death. Then comes *Bernard*, bearing a high-power rifle with which he means to cheat the trade-gin of its victim. "A GAME IN THE BUSH," by Georges Surdez, is a complete novelette in the next issue.

"YOU'VE only got a pick-and-shovel brain!" growled *Cronkhite*, the general foreman, when *Paddy O'Gorman* tries to convince him that there is foul play in the big Barren Ridge camp. But when the "pick-and-shovel brain" starts to find out why every workman who drew his time was murdered, then there is action in plenty. "THE BLACK CHANNEL," by Max Bonter, a novelette of railroad construction-camp life, complete in the next issue.

Other stories in the next issue are forecast on the last page of this one.

Don't forget the dates of issue for *Adventure*—the 10th, 20th and 30th of each month

Feb. 10. 1923 Adventure Vol. 39. No. 1

The MAD COMMANDERS

A Complete Novelette

by Frank C. Robertson

Author of "That Finer Fiber," "Silver Zone," etc.

I

AROUND the steep face of the mountains which enclosed the lower end of Pocatello Valley crawled a dozen herds of sheep, spread out like enormous, dingy, white blankets, and moving ahead in straight, horizontal lines except when a herder would send his dog to one flank or the other to edge in the stragglers.

Below the herd, on a dim wagon-road that skirted the base of the mountains, the camp wagons kept pace with the herds, all keeping about the same distance apart, usually around a mile.

This was but a fragment of the great Spring exodus of sheep from the Nevada Desert to the Spring and Summer ranges in Idaho—fruit of the incessant, interminable search and struggle for "free range."

Just at sunset the leading camp of the dozen pulled away from the road to the top of a small knoll—bed-ground of a thousand herds in the past—and stopped. A straight, medium-sized man of sixty, with a well-trimmed iron-gray beard, dressed in old yet substantial corduroys, hopped out of the wagon and with lively fingers began unhitching the team.

It was but the work of minutes until the horses were unharnessed, the hobbles on their ankles, and huge leather nose-bags, half-full of oats, on their heads. Then the elderly camp-mover lifted out a pair of ten-gallon water-kegs, and hopped back into

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the wagon and began unpacking. Valises were picked up off the bed and arranged on the shelf above the bed in the back of the wagon. Pots and pans were hung on their accustomed hooks. The water-bucket filled and hung in its place at the end of the right-hand projection, just inside the door. The wash basin was stuck in the canvas pocket where it belonged just outside the door. Then the broom was used industriously on the floor and stuck inconspicuously behind a bow in the top of the camp.

Next, the clock was fished out of the bed where it had been packed for the ride, and suspended from a bent wire in the top of the camp. The most fragile articles to be unpacked came last. These were a No. 2 Betz camp-lamp and its chimney. They were carefully wiped and placed on the small, boxed-in shelf provided for the purpose. In a sheep-camp every inch of space must be utilized.

Satisfied that all was neat and clean inside, the camp-mover fished out a few dry kindlings from beneath the camp range, and soon had a fire roaring. Then he hopped outside again and around to the back where he unfastened a small, dead cedar tree from the boot. While the tea-kettle boiled he chopped the night's wood and ricked it up in the small space behind the stove. All these preparations had taken, according to the camp-mover's watch—which was a good one—just twenty-five minutes.

At the eleven other camps belonging to the same outfit the camp-movers were going through practically the same procedure, though possibly without displaying quite so much speed and vim. In fact it was plainly to be seen that the elderly camp-mover did his work zestfully, and was inordinately pleased with himself.

"I reckon the old man can git out an' step with the best of 'em yet when he has to," he congratulated himself.

He jerked open the end-gate in the back of the wagon, which was incidentally the door to the storeroom beneath the bed, and dragged out a hind quarter of a freshly killed mutton. In a moment he was busily engaged cooking supper.

There were approximately twenty-five thousand sheep in those twelve herds, each sheep worth in excess of ten dollars. Therefore it was a quarter of a million dollar outfit, and this represented, so it was said, less than one fourth the wealth of the owner.

The owner was Bill Matthews—the elderly camp-mover in the lead camp.

MATTHEWS was worthy of a word in any man's country. Green as the Ozark hills he came from, he had started out to win fortune in the West. By sheer accident he had started in the sheep business and had hung grimly on for forty years, triumphing over the sheepman's worst enemies—cattlemen, and the perils of nature. And in those years those two had been something to triumph over. Yet Matthews had come through cleanly, except that one part of his nature had become corroded wherever cattlemen were concerned.

He had introduced a better grade of sheep than were common on the range, and had not made the mistake of trying to make all the money there was to be made in the business. Several close escapes from financial disaster had taught him to limit his live-stock holdings, and invest the earnings in various other enterprises. The net result was that he was quite properly termed a millionaire.

He had married, raised one daughter to maturity, and been left a widower. He was of the hardy breed of pioneers, and though he had maintained a luxurious home in Salt Lake City for a good many years he was never so happy as when he could get out among his herds and camps.

He had known but one master; the slim, chestnut-haired girl who called him "dad," and who was surprizingly like him in the matter of wilfulness.

So busy was Matthews with his cooking operations that he failed to hear a horseman riding up until some one shouted—

"Supper ready?"

Matthews' head popped out of the camp door like a grizzled Jack-in-the-box.

"Gee, I was afraid it was the herder already, an' me not havin' supper ready," he said. Despite his later years as a financier he still clung to the speech of the range. "Git down, Martin, an' we'll have a bite of supper directly."

Martin Phillips climbed off the big, brown horse he was riding, slipped the bridle off, and climbed into the camp where he rolled back on the bed out of the way. He was a smooth-shaven, clean-cut fellow standing just under six feet and weighing a hundred

and seventy pounds, and he was still on the good side of thirty. In his eyes lurked a quizzical expression which betrayed a lively imagination. Every swift, sure movement that he made marked habitual efficiency.

Mart was Bill Matthews' foreman.

"How's everything back along the line?" Bill queried.

"Moving along fine," Mart responded.

"Things always do when I'm around," Bill Matthews remarked.

Mart grinned.

"Say, Bill," he said, "seeing that things always run so smooth when you're around, suppose you sort of look after things for a few days while I ride on ahead and see how the lambing ground looks. We'll have to hire a couple of men and fix up around headquarters before the herds get there."

"I didn't come out here to work," Matthews demurred smilingly. "I'm on my vacation. Still, I can stay ten days longer I reckon; but I'm goin' to stick to this wagon. I'm not goin' to go prancin' up an' down the line on a horse."

"We've got a good bunch of boys, and every one of them has been over the trail at least once. All you need do is set the pace and they'll follow."

"All right. All right. Run along," Matthews agreed. "I'd kinda like to be boss over my own outfit fer a while, an' I ain't had a chance since you've been bossin' me around."

At that moment the herder came in and the three men crowded around the table which Bill let down from the side of the camp, and which he had covered with smoking mutton chops, fried potatoes, hot sourdough biscuits, butter, jam, and hot coffee.

"Sheep-herders make me tired by always kickin' about the lonesome life," Matthews commented. "Why even on trail, an' in the lambin' season they don't often have to work more'n eighteen or twenty hours a day, so what does a little lonesomeness amount to. Why, when I begun herdin' sheep out in Wyoming years ago a shep' couldn't get out from behind a bush without stoppin' a charge of buck-shot from some cattleman. Didn't have no time to get lonesome then."

"That time is likely to come again," Mart observed, "if this range-grabbing isn't stopped. There's a rush of homesteaders starting in, and if the government doesn't take steps to control the range, or the stockmen make voluntary allotments, range-wars will surely come. The stockmen, that are crowded out by homesteaders are going to crowd somebody else out. In fact they are doing it all the time. Look at the range-wars in Wyoming last year!"

"It ain't because the range is gittin' scarce. It's because of the hoggishness of cattlemen," Matthews argued. "I'm absolutely opposed to government interference—especially this Forest Reserve business they're talkin' up."

Mart studied the face of his employer. It was in the days when conservation was just beginning to be strongly advocated, and the young foreman was one of the few stockmen who did not see in it a menace to the live stock industry.

"It's not cattlemen alone, Bill," Mart remarked. "Sheep outfits are every bit as hoggish. The fact is they all know that soon there won't be enough range to go around so they are trying to get theirs while the getting is good. The result is that sheep are tramping out the range. If it isn't stopped in a few years there won't be any range for anybody. That's why I'm in favor of government control of the range."

"Bosh! As long as I'm in the sheep business I'm goin' to control my own range. I've scrapped cattlemen all my life, an' I've always held my own without help. I reckon I can keep on."

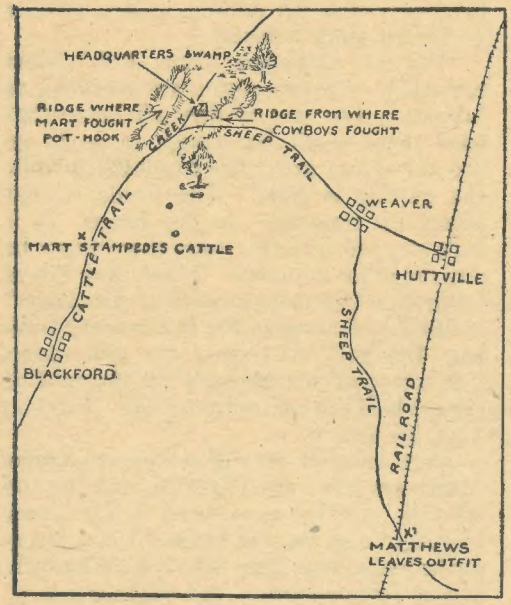
Mart knew it was of no use to argue. Matthews was a good man to work for and all that, but he was settled in his views. Through long years of bitter, vicious struggle he had always been able to hold his own, and he resented any outside interference.

The next morning Mart was on his way to the lambing ground. It was a little more than a hundred miles to the little town of Weaver where the Spring supplies were bought. Here Mart stayed all night after his two days ride. Also he hired a couple of dry farmers to go over "the hump," as the low mountain-range that separated the agricultural land from the grazing land was called.

THIS grazing land was rough, chopped-up country, too high and frosty for farming purposes; yet not strictly mountainous. Years before it had been a cattleman's paradise, but the cattlemen had gradually given way before the swarms of sheep which swooped in by the tens of thousands. Five years before, Bill Matthews had seized a strip of range rather

more than a township in extent, and because his outfit was large he had been able to repel all invaders. Though it was Government land he exercised all the right of ownership over it, even to the extent of building upon it and fencing part of it.

At first he had only built a shack beside a small creek in the center of the range, known as Sunday Creek, in which to store supplies—salt and such. Finally this was found insufficient and another building was put up to serve as a central camp for the



camp-movers to live in. Then several hundred acres were fenced to serve as horse pasture and buck pasture. Then cutting-out corrals were built, and eventually these were enlarged to shearing pens.

Soon a dipping vat was installed, and this required more corrals. Also, as these improvements required an extra crew of men considerable of the time, a larger cook-shack and a bunkhouse had to be added. All told it represented an investment of several thousand dollars. And it was all on Government land.

Because sheep can not be properly maneuvered in the timber these improvements had been clustered in the center of a small meadow through which the creek ran, and which was bounded on two sides by low, rolling ridges covered with timber. The men naturally fell into the habit of calling the place "headquarters."

Headquarters was about fifteen miles from the town of Weaver. Mart rode on ahead, leaving his two hired men to follow in a buck-board containing their grub and the necessary tools to fix up the buildings and the fences which were sure to be in bad condition after a long, hard Winter.

Mart, however, did not go at once to headquarters. His main object in coming on ahead was to ascertain the condition of the range. There had been a heavy snowfall, but an early Spring and plenty of warm weather. Already the grass was well up and hardened enough not to be washy.

Well pleased with the outlook for a good lambing, Mart set out for headquarters. He looked at his watch and saw that it was nearly noon, so he figured that his two men had had ample time to get to headquarters and prepare dinner. He set out on a lope and soon struck the trail that followed Sunday Creek through the brush.

He came out at the head of the meadow, not three hundred yards from the maze of corrals and shacks which composed headquarters before he got a glance at the place. The first look caused him to pull up his horse suddenly. He would not have been greatly surprised at the thin twist of smoke that curled out of the cook-shack, for any chance passer-by might have stopped to cook a meal; but the whole place lacked that dead air which it always had after four or five months of desertion. It was this which warned him something was amiss.

Then his eyes rested upon his two men. They were standing by their buck-board on the edge of the meadow, and their team had not been unhitched. Mart turned his horse and rode to them.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

"There's a nigger in there what ordered us away—says you ain't got any right here," one of the men informed him nervously.

"Well, that nigger has got a crust," Mart said. "Why didn't you throw him out?"

"We're peaceable men, we are, an' ain't lookin fer no trouble," the men explained.

"Besides," said the man who had spoken first, "it ain't jus' the nigger alone. He says there's a cow outfit pre-empted this range, an' that there's a bunch o' men out now fixin' fence, an' when they come back they'd fix us plenty if we stayed here, an'——"

"An' the boss of the gang is no other than

Dead-eye Bender," his mate cut in, determined to announce the climax.

"The ——," Mart blurted in genuine alarm. If Dead-eye Bender was around then almost certainly serious trouble was at hand. In three range states the one-eyed gunman had left a bloody trail of murdered sheepherders behind him, and it was known that his gun was for hire to any cattleman willing to pay the price.

Silent, moody, morose, he went his deadly way, shooting from ambush and leaving his lonely victims to be picked up days afterward when all clues of the slayer would be gone, if such clues ever existed.

In time the very mention of his presence on any range was sufficient to make sheepherders call for their time. It was a safe business, his. A few casual words regarding a successful war upon sheepmen on some other range, and the discerning cattleman knew, of course without positive proof, that Dead-eye had no scruples about killing. In the man's cankerous soul was a moral dry-rot which had dulled his conscience until he thought no more of killing a man than he did of killing a mosquito.

Mart knew well enough that not one cattleman in fifty would resort to the methods employed by Bender; yet on every range there was sure to be at least one outfit willing to take any steps whatever to win their point. The fact of Bender's presence here told him that he was opposed to one of these outfits.

"Lookit! There they come," one of the dry farmers pointed out.

From the wagon-road just below them five men rode toward the cook-shack. Stern, shaggy looking men on good horses. Four of them rode in pairs, but the leader rode alone. This man swerved his horse and rode close to where Mart stood with his two men. He was a squat, heavily built man with face, hands, and chest entirely covered with coarse black hair.

He only glanced inquiringly in their direction as he rode by, but Mart saw that one baleful eye was fixed and sightless.

II

THE five horsemen passed on to the corrals without a word or a second glance. Mart took his eyes from them as he heard the grinding of wheels. His two hired men were in the seat of their buckboard and were going home.

"Wait," Mart called. "This matter isn't settled yet."

"It is as far as we're concerned. We ain't huntin' fer no trouble," they chorused.

Mart was not at all pleased at being left alone, though he knew the two farmers would be of no help in case of trouble. At any rate he was not going to go away until he had had a talk with the men who had now disappeared inside the cook-shack. He turned his horse and rode toward the cook-shack. He noticed that his two men had stopped at a safe distance to watch developments.

Without getting off his horse Mart shouted. A tall, raw-boned, ungainly negro, unprepossessing in appearance, and with a steel hook in lieu of a left hand, appeared.

"What are you fellows doing here?" Mart demanded crisply.

The negro leered.

"Jus' what might yuh be doin' heah, white man?" he countered.

"This is the property of the Matthews Sheep Company, and I'm the foreman. You're trespassing," Mart snapped.

"Dat's *good*—trespassin' on *free* range!" the negro chuckled.

"What's the idea anyway?" Mart demanded indignantly. "Who are you speaking for—sheep outfit, cattle outfit, or what?"

"Sheep? Man, dat *is* good!" the negro sneered. "Fella, you let one dem white men in heah ketch you makin' any such an asperasion as dat an' jus' one moh clean shirt'll do you."

"I want to talk to your boss. Send him outside," Mart said curtly.

"Restrain yo' se'f, bo'. T'ain't healthy to git too rambunctious wid yo' curiousity. But if you is got any idear dat yuh is got a claim on dis heah range de quickah yuh disabuse yo min' o' dem false conceptions the longer yo gwine live. F'om heah on dis range am gwine be occupied by de J. W. Cow Comp'ny."

"Who's running it?" Mart asked.

"Ja'vis an' Wentworth am de proprietors. Huck Steadman am fo'man, Dead-eye Bender persarves law an' o'dah, an' me, *Pot-hook* Brown, am de gen'ral factotum. It am a combination dat kain't be beat. Any mo' infomation you pines foh?"

"Not from you," Mart replied curtly. "If this Dead-eye Bender is inside send him out."

"I'll *ask* him to come out; but yuh heah me, white man, theh ain't no man *sendin'* Dead-eye Bender no whah, nor yit any place."

Pot-hook disappeared inside the shack and Mart shifted his position in the saddle so that he sat facing the open door. The holster of his gun was shoved well up ahead so that the gun inside could be got at easily and swiftly. Yet both hands rested idly on the saddle-horn as Dead-eye appeared.

The nerveless eye of the gunman gazed steadily at the sheep foreman, but the good eye could scarcely be seen as it shifted warily about behind the shelter of a hedge-like row of eye-winkers.

Dead-eye strode a few feet from the door and stood with his thumbs hooked into his belt. Behind him were grouped the four cowboys and the negro cook. Mart ignored the others and focused his gaze on the gunman.

"What d'ye want?" Dead-eye demanded gruffly.

"An explanation, first thing, of what you and your men are doing in these buildings," Martin retorted coldly.

"What's it to you? This is free range."

"The ground is free, perhaps, but the buildings, corrals, and fences are private property," Mart said.

"I think not," the gunman replied. "You ain't got no right to build on guv'ment land. If you do anybody can occupy it that wants to."

"A man has a right to hold the range he is using, and that right extends to the privilege of building upon it."

"Sort of a range-lawyer ain't you," Dead-eye sneered. "At that you may be right; but you see, bo', you ain't usin' this range around here, an' you ain't goin' to use it. So I reckon the buildin's go with the land."

POT-HOOK and the cowboys were grinning over Dead-eye's shoulder irritatingly. This bare-faced confiscation of the fruits of other men's labor, and the contemptuous treatment they accorded him made Mart seethe with anger, but his good sense warned him that he was at a hopeless disadvantage in case of violence. And violence was what Dead-eye was working for. Mart made his tone firmly civil when he spoke again.

"The point is that we have used this range for five years, which gives us a claim prior to all others. As long as we need it this range is ours to use."

"Nix. Guv'ment land belongs to him who can hold it," Dead-eye jeered. "An I'm here to say that Jarvis an' Wentworth can hold it."

The name of the cattle outfit sounded familiar, but Mart was too angry to think about that.

"I think not," he challenged.

Considerably to his surprize the men did not accept the gage of battle. But the time was not yet ready for them to offer violence.

"Possession am de hefty side ob de law, sheep man," Pot-hook contributed with a grin.

"Possession? You lose on that issue too," Mart said steadily. "You haven't any cattle here, so you're trespassing on private property when you occupy these buildings."

"Don't you worry none about no cattle bein' here," Dead-eye retorted. "They'll be here, an' they'll stay here."

To be barred out from what he considered practically his own property made Mart feel helpless, but he still tried to argue the point.

"Listen," he said, "don't you know it's customary in any white man's country for an outfit to have the unmolested right to use a range they've had the year before? So what right have you fellows to blow in here and order us off?"

"We've got the one law of the range we recognize—first come, first served, if the powder hangs out," Dead-eye snapped.

"Then if that's the only way you'll settle it we'll have to accept your terms—but we're going to have this range," Mart said evenly.

He reached in his inside pocket and brought forth a check book.

"I was going to give those two men out there fifty dollars for making repairs here, but as you've already done it I'll pay you instead—only, I'll deduct ten dollars that I'll have to pay them for coming over."

Resting the check book on the fork of his saddle he scrawled out a check for forty dollars, payable to Jarvis and Wentworth. Not until he saw the name on the

check in his own handwriting did he realize where he had heard the name before. He was smiling as he tore out the check and handed it down to Dead-eye.

"If you'll take my advice you'll accept that check, for I'll tell you frankly that we are going to get this range, and I don't think there'll be any trouble about it as soon as Samuel Jarvis knows whose range he's trying to hog. Why Jarvis and Bill Matthews are next-door neighbors, and their—their——"

Some way Mart could not bring himself to mention the other connecting link, though it was a very real one.

"Bein' neighbors don't mean nothin' when free range is at stake," Dead-eye sneered. He scrutinized the check with beetling brows. His education was meager and he had to plow through the written lines laboriously. When he finished he tore the check in two and stepped upon it.

"Don't never git fresh with me again, stranger, unless you want your carcass —— well ventilated," he said.

"I'm not getting fresh. I'm merely making you a fair offer. It's the best you'll ever get. If you won't take it, well and good; but you've got to get out of here. You can't occupy these buildings, and you can't use this range," Mart stated.

"We can't, eh?" Dead-eye demanded furiously.

"That's saying it," Mart agreed. "I'll give you three days to move off."

Bender glared at the sheepman, his hairy hands opening and closing convulsively, unable for the moment to subdue his wrath enough to speak.

Mart leaned ahead over the saddle horn, his gaze fixed upon the killer, and his right hand hovering just above the handle of his gun. He had already recognized that the other white men were not going to take the offensive away from their champion, so, for the moment, they did not require watching. Pot-hook was a menace, but that was a danger that had to be risked.

Bender's good eye wavered, but the other, dead and sightless, seemed fixed upon the sheep foreman with hypnotic intensity. Mart had a curious feeling as his whole attention came to be absorbed with that eye. With an effort of will he wrenched his eyes away, and that moment saw the killer's gun hand flash downward. Instantly his own weapon seemed fairly to leap from the holster and cuddle in his hand.

Dead-eye Bender's hand left his gun as though it had touched hot iron. That moment Mart knew that Dead-eye would never kill in a fair fight.

"I'm sayin' this to you," Bender jerked out. "We'll give you just ten minutes to git away from here—an' stay away."

There was nothing to be gained by staying, and there was a big possibility of being murdered. Mart was not inclined to think that his usefulness on earth was over, so he discreetly reined his horse and rode away at an angle that enabled him to keep the shack under surveillance. The white men went into the shack, but Pot-hook broke into derisive song.

"Heah's yo' hat—oh, what's yo' hurry?" he croaked in a shrill tenor.

Mart had taken a violent dislike to the negro.

"You'll have to go home, men; I won't be able to use you just now," Mart told the two farmers when he came up to them.

He wrote them out a check for five dollars each and rode away.

The men winked at one another and drove on. Phillips, they were sure, had backed down—as it was in the very nature of every sheepman to back down when confronted by cattlemen.

At nine o'clock the following morning Mart met his outfit just entering Portneuf Cañon. He passed through the lead-herd, which was in a lane, and found Bill Matthews driving the camp behind the herd, and helping to keep the tag end of the herd moving along.

"Well, boy," old Bill greeted him, "you musta made a flyin' trip."

Mart's big brown horse dropped his head wearily between his knees, and the action told Matthews that something was wrong. The genial smile faded from his face.

"What's the matter?" he snapped.

In terse sentences Mart related what had happened.

"And what did you do?" Matthews demanded crisply.

"Gave 'em three days to get off."

"An' what answer did you get?"

"Ten minutes to get off."

"An' you——"

"Got off!"

"Well?"

"Their cattle aren't there yet. I'm going to pick the three best men in the outfit, and the best dog, and start the sheep up the trail with the wether band. Those wethers can be pushed to twenty-five miles a day. If we get stock on the range first we'll have public opinion back of us at any rate," Mart stated.

"All right. All right," Matthews concurred absently, not half understanding what Mart had said because he was deep in thought.

Mart glanced at his employer curiously. He scarcely knew the man. The genial Bill Matthews was gone, and in his clothes stood a grim man with a hard, unrelenting visage. All the old, ingrained hatred toward cattlemen had come to the surface, completely smothering every kindly impulse unil the range war was over.

"I don't think this is going to amount to much," Mart said in as light a tone as he could command. "You see, that cow outfit belongs mostly to Sam Jarvis who is your next-door neighbor, and when you tell him it's you he's trying to crowd out he'll quit."

"You're —— right he'll quit," said Matthews bitterly. His face was white, and his grizzled beard fairly quivered with anger. "No —— cattleman ever made me eat dirt yet, an' I don't intend to begin here."

"Now look here, Bill," Mart coaxed softly. "Don't make a row. Go to Jarvis quietly as a man and neighbor and show him where he is in the wrong. I'll bet that he orders his outfit to pass on."

"Your authority as foreman only goes so far, remember," Matthews said. "I'll deal with Jarvis to suit myself. You don't know cattlemen. They'll never leave a range till they're run out."

"I'm not trying to tell you how to run your business, Bill," Mart declared mildly; "but I want you to realize what you're lettin' us in for if you make Jarvis mad. You know as well as I do that one or two sheepherders ain't got a chance on earth with a slow moving band of sheep against ten or twelve well-mounted cowboys, let alone the professional killers that go around shooting in the dark."

"If you're afraid, I'll give you your time," Matthews cried.

"I'm not afraid, Bill. I think we've got the best right to that range, and I'll go the limit to hold it; but I want to avoid trouble if I can. If it comes to a range war a lot of men are going to get hurt—or killed," Mart said quietly.

"Nobody'll git hurt," Matthews said harshly. "I know a way to make Sam Jarvis pull in his horns. The bottom has been fallin' out of beef, while wool's been climbin'. I happen to know a certain bank that's been carryin' Jarvis over, an' he ain't even paid the interest on a loan of a hundred thousand dollars that's a month overdue. An' I control that bank."

Matthews looked up at his foreman triumphantly. Mart knew that his employer's attitude, if persisted in, would destroy the last chance to avert the range war. Yet it was hard to argue against blind fanaticism, and Matthews' hatred of cattlemen amounted to just that. Still, he felt that he must make the effort.

"You may be able to smash Jarvis financially, and all that. But it will take time, and time is the one thing we can't afford to waste. We'll be lambing in a week, and if we can't have our range we're done for. You know that an outfit the size of ours can't find a place to squeeze in."

"Then I've got a card in the hole that will make 'em quit," Matthews said, his tone even more harsh and bitter than it had been before.

"You have?" Mart queried in surprize.

"I have. Effie!"

"My God, man, you're not going to drag Effie into this are you?" Mart asked in amazement.

"No cattlemen can do me," Matthews said. "Young Burt Jarvis thinks he's goin' to marry Effie, but if they don't pull off our range I'll bust that up *pronto*."

Mart found an excuse to go behind the wagon. His thoughts were in a turmoil. He knew Effie Matthews rather well. She had always been something of a tom-boy, and had spent several Summers in the mountains with the outfit and her father. Mart had been a camp-mover then, and he and Effie had been mighty good pals. Then Mart had taken a belated course in the Business College which Effie was attending, and that Winter he had had hopes.

But he had failed to get Effie to commit herself seriously, and then had come young Burt Jarvis with nothing, apparently, but time and money; and with just as happy-go-lucky an attitude toward life as Effie

herself. Serious-minded Mart had quietly dropped out.

Now it occurred to him that if circumstances should suddenly drop young Jarvis out of the running—. The possibilities were rather enticing to say the least. Mart ran the matter swiftly over in his mind; then returned to Bill.

"Look here, Bill," he said mildly. "You're a good old plug until you smell a cattleman. Then you ain't got a lick of sense. Simply boil over on the stove till the kettle goes dry. So you need somebody to speak a few plain words to you. I ain't got a thing to say about you and old Jarvis throwing notes and mortgages at each other if you feel that way; but when you try to drag Effie into this mess it's just too —— contemptible for words."

Matthews' mouth dropped open, and his tongue floundered in a vain attempt to formulate words. He reached inside his coat pocket with his right hand.

"Now listen, Bill, before you drag out your check book," Mart went on coolly. "There'll be plenty of time to fire me if you feel so disposed, but first I want you to consider what I'm saying. If you start anything like that you'll be sorry. If Effie wants to marry young Jarvis, and he's all right—you've no reason to think he isn't—you'll always regret it if you cause trouble just because you got into a huff."

"But a —— cattleman! I don't want my girl even associatin' with the breed. —— ragne-robbers, bullies, murderers—the whole lot of 'em," Matthews roared.

"That's all right, Bill. If you don't want Effie to marry Burt because he's the son of a cattleman speak out and tell her so. Then let her decide for herself."

"I've fought cattlemen tooth an' nail for forty years, an' never been licked yet. I'm not goin' to begin now. Neither am I goin' to take water by askin' Mr. Jarvis will he please take his cattle away an' let me be," Matthews ended sarcastically.

"Then, if that's the way you feel about it, don't go home until I have a chance to see what I can do," Mart suggested.

"Are you workin' for me, or am I workin' for you?" Bill inquired sardonically.

"I'm not forgetting; but I don't think, Bill, that you'll fire me because I'm trying to save you trouble."

"Well, go ahead an' see what you can do," Matthews grumbled. "But no —— cattleman is goin' to put over anythin' on me."

III

MART changed horses with the first herder and at once got busy picking the three men he wanted to send with the wether band. He had suggested to Matthews that he hold up the leading herd as soon as it got through the lane, so that the wether herd could get ahead. Mart himself stopped the other herds.

It was ticklish business, this picking out men to face possible assassination. But the danger had to be faced. Mart was somewhat surprized to find that he, himself, who had always prided himself upon being a peaceable, reasonable man, was looking forward to the inevitable conflict with a feeling of exhilaration. He soon found others who felt the same way.

He had already made up his mind which herder he wanted. This was Jack Owens, a red-headed, quiet, experienced herder who had been through range wars in Colorado.

"I'll go," Jack said quietly, laying his hand upon his dog's head. "I reckon me an' Dick can git that herd up there as quick as anybody."

Mart looked at the dog, a tall, short-haired, hungry-looking mongrel who seemed like a simp but knew everything there was to be known about herding sheep.

"I'll get a man to help you with the herd beside the camp-mover," Mart promised.

Mart hesitated long before deciding who this helper was to be, but finally picked out a strange waif from nowhere who had come to the outfit half frozen and penniless the Winter before and had remained as an extra man ever since. He answered to the name of "Chick" Judge. While he knew next to nothing about herding sheep, there was a peculiar quality about him which convinced Mart that he could be depended upon in an emergency.

"Don't you know, I've always doped it out that these here cowpunchers ain't a bit bad outside o' books. My idea is that any plain-town crook who can handle a revolver is a match for a dozen of 'em," Chick remarked when Mart outlined the situation.

Mart glanced at him shrewdly. He had known for a long time that Chick was city bred. Now it occured to him that Chick might have unexpected propensities which

might turn out useful. It was settled that Chick was to go.

For camp-mover Mart intended to keep Lem Davis who was the regular wether-band camp-mover. Lem was a laughing-eyed boy of twenty—game for anything. His parents were Mormon converts who had emigrated from Wales years before, and Lem had inherited the usual Welsh disposition of instant readiness for fun or fight.

MART gathered the three men in Lem's camp and outlined the situation more fully.

"We're going to be up against it, boys—hard! Dead-eye Bender won't fight fair, and the cowboys, though they may be good fellows in their own way look upon sheep-herders as fair game—to be shot down with no more compunction than they would show a coyote.

"If Bill don't lose his head and goes to Jarvis man to man there won't be any trouble; but if he causes a row we can expect to be shot at from ambush, or to be raided at night. And I want it understood that whoever goes must stay with the sheep. I won't hold it against any of you if you decide not to come."

"It listens like the life, bo. Count me in up to the neck," Chick Judge said promptly.

"I've never quit an outfit in a pinch yet," Jack Owens said.

Lem, whom Mart had figured would be first to volunteer, hesitated.

"Dawg-gone it, Mart, I don't know," he said frankly. "My mother's a widow, an' I've got a kid sister I want to put through high school. Now if I go up there an' git killed what chance will they have?"

"That's enough, Lem. You're dead right. I'll try to get somebody else," Mart said. No time could be wasted, so he at once mounted his horse to canvass for another volunteer. He was a little disappointed, for Lem was far and away the nerviest, and most efficient camp-tender in the outfit. He had not got fifty feet from the camp when Lem called him back.

"Oh, Mart—I'm goin'," he shouted.

Mart came back.

"Why the sudden change of mind?" he asked.

"Well, dawg-gone it, I can't miss all that excitement. I'd just naturally go crazy if I stayed behind an' let somebody else go," Lem said eagerly.

The boy was standing in the doorway of the camp, and Mart could see his eyes shining wistfully.

"I don't know, Lem. I think your first decision was right," Mart said doubtfully.

The boy began to plead and, partly because of this, partly because Lem was such a valuable man, Mart allowed him to reverse his first decision; thereby putting an added worry upon his own shoulders every time he thought of Lem's mother and sister.

Immediately after dinner the rangy, muscular wethers were stepping out briskly up the trail. Mart stopped at Matthews' camp. He hoped that a few hours reflection would have changed his employer's ideas. Bill, however, was not present.

They were only a couple of miles from the railroad, and Mart wondered if Bill could have hurried home to raise the row with the Jarvis people. Then he reflected that there was no passenger train until just before dark. The herder, however, quickly informed him that Bill had gone to the tracks to take a freight. Such haste showed conclusively that the sheepman had not changed his mind. This destroyed Mart's last hope that a range war could be avoided.

Bill's defection left Mart under the necessity of finding another man to move the lead camp, and a man to act as straw boss. To make matters worse other outfits were crowding up behind, there was no place to get out of Portneuf Cañon, and feed along the trail was practically gone.

Mart hitched up Matthews' camp team and moved the camp himself. That evening he rode to the nearest town to look for men. To his disappointment there were no experienced men to be had, though a pair of transients who had never seen a sheep camp professed an eagerness to work. Reluctantly Mart took them back to the outfit and set them to work—one to take Matthews' place moving camp; the other to herd a band which had been herded by a veteran shep' named Mortensen. Then he commissioned Mortensen to act as straw boss.

Having put the outfit in as good a shape as possible Mart hesitated as to his next step. He wanted to be back on the lambing grounds as soon as the wether band arrived there, but he knew that he had a day or two to spare as he could easily pass the herd

on horseback. A scheme had been fermenting in his brain for several hours which, if carried out, necessitated taking a roundabout route which would make it problematical whether he could reach Sunday Creek ahead of the wether herd.

This plan was the audacious one of filing a homestead on the land where headquarters was situated. This would give him a legal right to dispossess the trespassing cattlemen, though it would not necessarily enable him actually to effect it, or hold the adjoining range if he did. It was simply a weapon which might, possibly, turn out to be useful.

On the other hand it meant the forfeiture of something which was a very tangible right in those days—his homestead right which he might later regret. The place itself had no intrinsic value except as it was useful to hold range.

There was another inevitable consequence which Mart did not overlook. If he once took this step he must live up to the legal requirements which, among other things, required seven months continuous residence each year for five years. This meant that he must give up his hard-won position as foreman. If he did not meet these requirements he could be contested, and vindictive enemies might easily make out a damaging case of fraud. More than one man had served time, even then, for fooling with the public domain.

He was tempted to dismiss it as a wild notion, not worthy of a second thought; but he could not dismiss from his mind the thought of grim, vindictive, cattle-hating Bill Matthews dragging Effie into the affair, nor the thought of Dead-eye Bender killing from ambush.

Naturally, in the end, he took the unselfish viewpoint, and made a long detour by the U.S. land office in Blackford. He arrived in that town in the evening, and the land office did not open until nine o'clock the following morning. Then it required some time to convince the register that he really wanted to file on land which was marked on the maps as worthless.

Thus it was near noon when he finally emerged from the land office with the receipt for his filing fee in his pocket. The first thing his eyes rested upon was a thousand head of long-legged, long-horned steers being trailed through town. On the right ribs of every steer was the J W iron. Scrutinizing the riders Mart recognized one of them as a man who had been with Dead-eye Bender at headquarters.

The significance of the thing was not lost upon him. Bender, also, had realized the necessity of getting stock on the range first and had sent a man back to meet the outfit and hurry the fastest cattle to the range.

Mart realized that the steers were certain to beat his wethers in the race. If they did so it would be a powerful advantage to the cattle outfit, for it would give them a semblence of right in the eyes of other range outfits, and that was the only outside opinion that could matter in the least, as the government remained proudly neutral in range disputes.

The attitude of the Government was, briefly: "Here is the free range; now fight it out among yourselves to see who takes it."

Mart saw several of the cowboys dismount and enter a saloon, so he sauntered in that direction. Before going inside he ascertained that they were all strangers to him. Then he advanced and mingled with the crowd. With his lean, sun-baked complexion, chaps, boots, spurs, and the .44 swinging negligently at his side Mart looked like a cow-puncher and was mistaken for such.

A veteran cowman was the center of attention in the saloon. By listening quietly for a few minutes Mart discovered that this was Huck Steadman, the foreman of the J W outfit. The man was quiet and affable as he joined in the saloon banter, and Mart instantly had hopes of being able to effect a settlement with him without trouble. This hope was dispelled when some one happened casually to mention sheep.

The cattle foreman's face became distorted with hate, exactly the way Bill Matthews' had done at the mention of cattlemen. Their expressions of settled fanaticism were identical.

"Sheep!" Steadman snarled. "This country will never be worth a tinker's —— till every sheep an' sheepherder is run out. They're killin' the country. They tramp out the grass wherever they go. They kill the timber, an' make it so it ain't a fit country for a white man to live in. It's gittin' so that ev'ry place you go you're rubbin' shoulders with a —— sheepherder. I've got so I can smell one for miles."

"Isn't it true," Mart asked, "that much of this trouble could be avoided if both

sides were willing to give and take a little? You know sheep don't kill the grass by grazing on it—it's this everlasting trailing about that does the damage. And the trailing could be avoided if the range scraps were stopped."

The entire crowd stopped whatever they were doing and gazed at Mart wonderingly. He went on with his ideas.

"If everybody could get together, agree on the range that's best fitted for sheep, and best fitted for cattle; then lay out regular trails there wouldn't be any great difficulty. There would be plenty of range for everybody if both sheep and cattlemen would raise better stuff and cut down the total number of stock. Doesn't that sound reasonable?"

Steadman favored Mart with a cold stare.

"Nothin' looks reasonable to me that sounds like a compromise with sheep. One or the other has got to go."

"It's that view-point which will make both go if it's persisted in," Mart argued calmly.

"By ——, you talk like a sheepman," Steadman thundered. "If you are, this saloon ain't big enough for both of us."

"Well, I'm a sheepman all right," Mart admitted. "I don't like the idea of being ordered out of a place where I've got a right to be; but you were here first, and you're an old man. I don't want to quarrel with you, so I'll go."

Mart started slowly toward the door, but paused as he heard Steadman sneer:

"I never seen a sheepherder yet that wouldn't quit cold the minute you talk up to 'em. They do somethin' to deserve killin', an' then run so's you have to shoot 'em in the back if you dispense justice."

Mart whirled and faced the grizzled cowman with narrowed eyelids, and hands on hips.

"I was going because I wanted to avoid trouble—not because I was scared," he shot out. "I'm going to stand right here for five minutes by the clock; then I'll walk out. That's because I still don't want trouble. But if you or your bunch start anything before the five minutes is up you'll get all you want—and more."

Amazement crept into the faces of the cowboys. It was a thing without precedent in range history for a sheepman to face a cowman with a threat of his own medicine—gun-play.

Mart had them at a disadvantage, morally as well as strategically, and they knew it. His pacific attitude before, and the clever way he had shifted the burden of aggression on to them would make it look very bad if they started anything. And Blackford was not altogether a cow town; there were many disinterested spectators present.

However, the necessity of standing there under the domination of a hated sheepman while the slow hands of the clock crawled around five minutes was gall and wormwood to the cowboys. Yet they waited—storing up hate.

At the end of five minutes Mart backed slowly toward the door. He had almost reached it when a cowboy from the outside, unaware of the tenseness within, hurried in for a drink. From the corner of his eye Mart recognized the man who had been on Sunday creek. The recognition was mutual.

"By ——," this individual exploded, "this is the huckleberry who give us three days to git off the public range, an' who lifted his feet like there was hot cinders under 'em when Dead-eye give him ten minutes to git off."

Huck Steadman came bounding across the room.

"Now I know what's back of that rotten talk of yours, an' it seems you ain't so brave as you pertend to be," he roared. "Let me tell you, shep', don't you let me or my men ever ketch any sheep or sheepmen on the Sunday Creek Range. I've 'stablished my camp there an' she sticks. I ain't bluffin' this time."

"Our camp was established there first, and we're going to hold that range," Mart said with a hard note in his voice. "So if you're going to do any killing start in now."

Half a dozen hands went for guns, but each stopped just before the draw as the sheep foreman covered the crowd from the door by a draw that was faster than the best of them. With a derisive, challenging grin Mart backed outside.

IV

MART headed for the livery stable with the intention of getting his horse and going on at once to meet the wether band, but the sight of the bunch of steers, now fast disappearing in a cloud of dust, suggested something which caused

him to change his mind. He killed time rubbing down his horse until he saw the J W cowboys mount their horses and ride on after their herd. Then he returned to the saloon and loafed there until sundown.

Mart had supper and started up the road the way the steers had gone. Night came on before he overtook the cattle, exactly as he had figured. Finally he saw a camp-fire ahead, and in the flare of it a dozen men sitting around indulging in their bedtime smoke. He tied his horse in the brush and crept in toward the fire until he was within hearing distance.

"That sheep outfit will bluff us if they can, but they'll crawl when they find we mean business—they always do," a cowboy was saying.

"But the varmints are sneakin', an' Jarvis tells me old Bill Matthews is a fighter. There's nothin' too dirty for him to do. He'll scatter poisoned grain on the range, poison the water holes, or anything else to win," Huck Steadman said.

"There's only one remedy for 'em, an' Dead-eye an' Pot-hook can supply that," the cowboy who had been at Sunday Creek chimed in.

"That's right, Dormack," Steadman agreed. "It was a stroke of genius on my part gittin' 'em when Jarvis told me to hunt a new range. But just the same I hope we git these steers up there before they git their cussed sheep on the range."

"Don't worry about the steers," Dormack advised. "One more day an' we can bed 'em on our own lawn."

Steadman tamped a final load of tobacco into his pipe.

"I reckon a couple of you had better git out there night-herdin'. We don't want any stampede on our hands."

"All right—but they'll be all right for another hour," Dormack drawled. "They can't git out of that blind pocket except back this way."

"Just the same you git ready to git out there," Steadman directed.

Mart began backing away, and when he reached his horse he wore a grin. He swung into the saddle, and as he rode he untied the slicker from behind his saddle. He knew the country well, and knew that there was only one pocket cañon in that vicinity. Also, he knew how to get into the head of it by means of a meandering cow-trail.

At the head of the draw he found himself only a short distance ahead of the leaders of the steers. He could not distinguish individual forms, but it was light enough. The whole bulk of the herd loomed up before him. He listened for a moment but could hear no sound of the night-herders; then he drew his gun and fired a single shot that whined through the air just above the leaders.

There was a chorus of startled snorts, and the sound of a short rush as the leaders turned back. They stopped almost instantly and there was an ominous hush as the entire herd seemed to hold its breath in uneasy alarm.

It was the psychological moment to start a stampede, and Mart seized the opportunity. He struck a match and applied it to the frayed bottom of his slicker. The oiled cloth blazed up instantly, and waving and rattling it Mart charged down upon the wondering cattle.

A BIG steer on lead let out a terrified bawl which announced to the world his opinion that the devil was after him. He charged back through the herd, and in ten seconds the whole herd was in motion.

The sheepman knew that no power on earth could check the cattle in the draw, and when they scattered at the end of the run, as they would surely do, Steadman and his men would be in for an all day's ride, at least, before the cattle could be again rounded up.

Mart flipped away the charred remnant of his slicker; reined his horse back up the pocket, and headed for the Sunday Creek Range. The range war was on and he had drawn first blood.

"I reckon that'll hold 'em for a while," he commented grimly.

Daylight found Mart on his own familiar range. He had no desire to precipitate a conflict with Bender at that time so he made a detour around headquarters. Yet he rode close enough to see that the horse-pasture fence had been fixed up in good shape to hold the *cavy* of the cow outfit. They undoubtedly intended to stay.

The sheep foreman rode on until he reached the small town of Weaver. Here he had breakfast and fed his horse. When the horse was rested he rode on until he met the wether band. Tersely he related

what had happened. To his satisfaction none of his men appeared greatly worried.

"Glory be, we're in for excitement. Gosh, I hope this'll be one time when cattlemen git it in the neck," Lem Davis exclaimed with gleaming eyes. Having burned his bridges behind him the boy was on fire with the spirit of adventure.

"We never can tell what will happen," Mart said seriously. "One thing is sure, however, they mean business. Unless Bill Matthews persuades Jarvis to drop it we're in for a fight, and there's little hope that he will the way Bill went away from here."

"We've all got good guns, and I'll serve notice that I intend to use mine," Jack Owens said quietly. "I know what cowboys are in a thing of this kind, and I don't propose to take from 'em what I've seen poor chaps endure when they fell into their hands."

"Put 'em up against real men, an' them dime-novel *hombres* wouldn't last as long as a Chinese lantern in a hurricane," Chick contributed.

"You'll find they're bad men all right," Mart replied soberly. "Stay away from them if you can, but there may be a call for gun action that can't be avoided. But if there is I want you to leave this Dead-eye Bender to me."

"Are you a gun-fighter too, boss?" Chick inquired.

"I never had a gun fight yet," Mart deprecated, "and I hope I never will. But you know how it is, sometimes a kid has a lot of foolish day-dreams. When I was a kid I used to imagine that the only life worth while was being a cowboy, of the rip, rarin' style—gun stuff and all that. Well, I had an old six-shooter and I practised constantly for the coming glory. I never got to be a cowboy, but I did get fairly proficient with a gun."

That was as near as he had ever come to boasting of any accomplishment, and he did it now only to give encouragement to his men. And it had that effect. They were courageous enough, but they were relieved to know that they had a leader who could be relied upon.

Mart stepped to the door with his hand negligently resting on the side of the camp.

"See that tin can?" he asked.

"Yes," they chorused.

Almost as if by magic the black handle of the gun was in his hand, and the empty can danced to and fro as six bullets were delivered into it in a continuous stream.

"You'll do," Chick Judge commented admiringly.

"I think so," Mart agreed without conceit. "Now if any of them insist on trouble your cue is that you are herding sheep and taking orders—not fighting for range. Send 'em to me."

They agreed; but without any great amount of enthusiasm.

Ten o'clock the next day found Mart on a high ridge overlooking headquarters. A mile behind was the wether band in charge of Jack Owens, and a quarter of a mile closer to headquarters than Mart himself was the camp wagon with Lem Davis driving, and Chick Judge, rifle across saddle, riding along as escort.

WITH his field glasses Mart saw the tall, one-armed negro come out and begin chopping wood. Apparently there were no other men about, nor was there a steer visible. Mart figured that Dead-eye and his men had been sent for to help gather the stampeded cattle. The sheep had won the race. He replaced the glasses in their case and rode on until he overtook the wagon.

"You boys wait here until I have a closer look around down there," he ordered.

He had scarcely turned a bend out of sight of the wagon than he heard it rumbling along after him. He cursed softly, but knew it was no use going back to repeat the command, for the boys would not let him ride in alone unless they were somewhere at hand.

Mart was within twenty feet of the cook-shack before Pot-hook looked up and saw him.

"Still here, are you?" Mart demanded curtly. "Don't you know that the three days I gave you to get off are up?"

"What's dat?" Pot-hook exclaimed in vast amazement. "You means to say dat you am orderin' us off! Dat you am serious?"

"Never more so in my life," Mart replied coolly. "Throw your traps together and move, or we'll throw you out."

"Well, ah'll be —— jiggered," Pot-hook said weakly, collapsing upon a log.

"Anyway you'll move," Mart snapped. He moved toward the open door of the cook-shack to investigate, but had not moved

three steps before he heard Lem's excited yell—

"Look out!"

Mart whirled and saw the negro towering over him. He was just in time to catch the glint of a double-bitted ax swinging toward his head. Mart twisted sidewise, and made a spasmodic grasp at the ax-handle with one hand. Luckily he struck it and twisted the blade to one side though he was powerless to do more than slightly weaken the force of the blow. The flat side of the ax landed squarely upon his head, and he went down like a stricken ox.

Pot-hook swung the ax again over the unconscious sheepman. As with most one-handed men, the good arm possessed nearly the strength of two and one blow would have split the white man's skull from top to chin. But Pot-hook also possessed the dramatic instinct. He stopped for an instant to apostrophize the unknown who had shouted the warning, with the ax poised in the air.

Scarcely had he started his statement of what disposition he intended to make of their "innards," as soon as he finished his first victim to his complete satisfaction, when Chick and Lem broke from the brush. Almost the same moment there was the roar of a rifle and a bullet struck squarely upon the blade of the ax, tearing it from his hands. That bullet had come from an unexpected direction. Then Chick stopped for a revolver shot, and Pot-hook's hat went spinning.

The negro did not lack courage, but he believed that he was surrounded. He bounded around the corner of the cook-shack; from there he gained the shelter of a corral fence, and loped through the maze of corrals and chutes like a jack-rabbit until he reached the timber on the north side of the meadow.

Lem and Chick hurried to the fallen foreman, but Jack Owens was there before them. It was the red-headed herder who had fired the first shot. The three men grouped over Phillips.

"Is he dead?" Lem asked in an awe-struck voice.

"It ain't you fellows' fault if he ain't," Jack Owens said gruffly. "A lot of you shep's, including Phillips, have got to learn that you can't fool with cattleman in a gentlemanly way. You've got to fight 'em like they do us—underhanded and anyhow. All I could see of that nigger was his ax."

The herder raised Mart's head and sent Chick for water.

"I thought you stayed back with the herd," Lem faltered.

"I left old Dick with the herd an' come on ahead as soon as you fellows left. I had a hunch Mart would pull some fool stuff like this. He'll have to learn that clean fightin' don't go," Jack said quietly.

"I don't know," Lem remarked. "This don't promise to turn out as much fun as I thought it would."

Half an hour later Mart began to come to himself.

"Why—what—where—" he stammered.

"We've met the enemy, an' the fort's ours," Chick said.

V

THE injured man heaved himself upright and gazed around bewilderedly.

"That nigger," he said wonderingly, "what became of him?"

"Took to the brush," Chick informed glibly. "What do we do next?"

With an effort of will the foreman got a grip on his wandering thoughts and reasoned connectedly. So far the battle was going favorably. Not only did Matthews own the improvements but Mart now had a possessory right to the land itself. He had prevented the cattle from getting on the adjoining range; now all that remained, apparently, was to establish firmly the fact that the sheep were on the range before the cattle.

"Jack, you and Chick get the herd here on the meadow as soon as you can. We'll bed them in the corrals here tonight, and get them back up in the timber tomorrow."

Leaving Lem to dump the cattlemen's belongings outside and to cook, Mart mounted his horse and rode to the highest pinnacle where he spent the remainder of the day searching the range with his field glasses for signs of the cowboys.

Nothing whatever came within the range of his vision that could possibly be construed as an enemy. At dark Mart returned to headquarters. Nothing had happened there, and the wethers were quietly chewing their cuds in one of the corrals.

They ate supper in the camp, and Chick and Lem were loudly confident that the

trouble was over. Jack Owens said nothing during the discussion, but at bedtime he quietly advised taking their beds into the brush. Though Chick and Lem pooh-poohed the idea Mart directed that Jack's suggestion be carried out.

Morning came, and it seemed that the younger men were right. Nothing had happened. Jack released the wethers to graze upon the meadow and the four men gathered in the cook-shack to discuss the situation.

SUDDENLY they heard old Dick bark, and all four tumbled outside. Two men were riding well in advance of a posse which numbered an even dozen. One of the men ahead was Dead-eye Bender. Mart recognized a number of the other men as J W punchers; among them Pot-hook, and the man named Dormack.

Several of the men swerved toward the herd, evidently with the intention of cutting it off from the corrals. But Jack Owens stepped out in full view and waved to the eagerly watching dog.

"Go git 'em, Dick—whoop 'em," Jack shouted.

Like a flash the sheep dog was away, cutting in between the herd and the advancing riders. As he reached the edge of the herd the dog let out a stentorian bark and the herd bunched like the closing of a bellows. Dick was immediately at their heels with his urgent, clamorous whoops, racing from side to side, and the wethers were shot into a corral on the run.

"Get inside, men," Mart directed quietly. The three men went inside and each took a position beside a window facing the advancing riders. Mart remained outside, in full view, until the riders were within easy calling distance.

"Hold up, there," he called out crisply.

The riders advanced as though they had not heard. Mart raised his hand.

"If you come a step further some of you will get hurt."

Still they came on.

"We'll shoot if you don't stop," he called firmly. "First time over your heads for a warning—second time to kill."

The riders came silently on.

Altogether, boys—just over their heads!" Mart called softly to his men.

The three rifles inside spoke as one, and, to Mart's horror, two men rolled from their saddles. The line of riders swung around in their tracks and galloped madly back to the timber.

Mart leaped inside the cook-shack.

"Who did that?" he demanded furiously.

"I didn't," Chick said promptly.

"Nor me," Lem spoke up.

"One of you is lying—I think both," Mart snapped. As Jack Owens was older and of a quieter nature Mart figured that he was the one who had obeyed orders.

"Only one of 'em lied," Jack said calmly. "I aimed at the nigger, but the other fellow got in the road."

"I might have shot one of 'em by mistake for I was purty darn nervous; but I aimed high," Lem said.

"Now you've put us in the wrong," Mart said bitterly.

"This is range war, son," Jack Owens retorted unemotionally.

Just then there was a volley of bullets from the brush, but the range was too far for the cowboys' revolver shots to do much damage. The three sheepherders replied lustily with their rifles.

Very soon the firing ceased from the timber, and Mart ordered his men to hold their fire while they waited for developments. Mart could not take his eyes from the two cowboys who had been shot. There was movement enough from each to show that they were still alive, and it was agonizing to watch their suffering.

Finally Mart seized a bucket of water and started out for the cowboys. Half-way to them, however, he stopped as a man rode out of the brush with a white rag on a stick. He had been one of the attackers, but prior to that time Mart had never seen him. The fellow stopped and waved his flag.

"Come on in," Mart called; "but this time I want you to obey orders."

Mart strode back to the cook-shack letting the man follow him. He had noticed that the fellow wore a badge of some sort on his vest, apparently that of a deputy sheriff.

"You fellows stay out of sight," Mart instructed his men. "Somebody is liable to have to stand trial for murder, and if that fellow sees all of you, all will be accused—and one of you is innocent. I'm going to find out who that innocent one is and see that they don't know he is in here."

The sheep foreman turned to confront the deputy sheriff.

"Wha'd'ye mean, resistin' a officer?" the fellow demanded gruffly. Mart saw that the man was trying to put up a bold front, but was in reality scared half to death.

"Why didn't you say you were an officer?" Mart retorted.

"I didn't have to—my badge was in plain sight."

"I don't believe it," Mart said bluntly. "Anyway, we had a right to resist trespassers. Coming here with our enemies and refusing to give an account of yourself excuses us."

"No it don't. We wasn't trespassers—couldn't be on free range," the man grinned.

Mart was tempted to flash the receipt for his filing fee on him, but thought better of it. It was best not to show his ace in the hole prematurely.

"I come out here to arrest one Martin Phillips," the officer declared. "You him?"

"What's the charge?" Mart countered.

" 'Tempted manslaughter."

"So? On whom?"

"On one o' Huck Steadman's punchers, Dave Ecker."

"Out there?" Mart questioned, indicating the two wounded cowboys, one of whom was now lying ominously quiet.

"That's another charge. I ain't got a warrant for that yet. Dave Ecker was most nigh trampled to death in that stampede you started the other night—prob'ly will die yet. Then it'll be first degree murder."

Mart turned pale. This was something he had not figured upon. It had been far from his intention to injure any one when he started the stampede. But if the man spoke truth he no doubt had a warrant, and to resist him was to nullify all his painstaking efforts to be legally right. On the other hand, to surrender certainly meant a lynching the moment he gave up his weapons.

"What evidence have you that Martin Phillips started that stampede?" he asked.

The officer grinned. He now felt himself in control of the situation.

"That's fer you to find out," he said.

Mart racked his brain to think what had betrayed him, and he remembered. As he was always on the move and received a great many business letters he had taken to carrying the letters in a packet rolled up in his slicker. When he had unrolled the slicker he had failed to think of the letters and they must surely have rolled to the ground where they had been picked up by one of Steadman's cowboys. He was aghast at his own carelessness. Noting it, the deputy sheriff was jubilant.

"I want the whole bunch of you now fer shootin' these two inoffensive punchers," gloated the officer.

"Let's see your warrants," Mart said.

"Now listen, shep'," the man wheedled, "it'll be lots better fer you fellers if you go in peaceable with me now. I'll see that nothing hurts you, but if you insist on warrants it'll look bad."

"We're not going with you to-day," Mart replied coolly. "I'll give you my word to come in and stand trial after this range fight is over, but I'm too busy right now."

"If you resist arrest I'll git my posse an' come in after you," the deputy threatened.

"Come ahead," Mart invited. Their eyes clashed a moment, and the sheepman won the duel of wills.

"You're makin' a big mistake by not goin' with me peaceable," the fellow admonished. "Will you let me call three of the boys in to get Ike an' Jim?"

"Certainly," Mart agreed. He eyed the man curiously, trying to get a straight look at his badge, but the fellow kept turned sidewise in his saddle so that only the edge of it showed. "You're not exactly a stranger to the J W outfit are you?" he asked.

"What's it to you?" the man flushed angrily.

"Nothing. Only, I'd like to see that warrant you said you had for me."

"I got it all right; but what's the use of showin' it if you're goin' to resist arrest."

Mart broke into a laugh.

"It was a quite smooth little scheme if we had happened to bite," he jeered. "But it won't work. You are no more deputy sheriff than I am. Now get your wounded men, and get out of here."

With an angry snarl the fellow rode away. He soon returned with three cowboys, and the two wounded men were carried away.

Yet the ruse of the fake deputy sheriff had almost worked. Because a respect for law was ingrained in his very nature, and because he abhorred the custom of settling range disputes by violence, Mart had been almost persuaded to risk the protection of the pseudo officer, and submit to arrest.

Now he knew that had he done so he would not have lived a half-hour. The episode taught him two things; that the J W was

capable of using craft and guile as well as blind force, and that it was unwilling to have the issue dragged before the courts in any form. Had this not been so they would have taken the lost packet of letters to the prosecuting attorney, and got a warrant for his arrest and a real deputy sheriff to serve it, instead of having one of their own number impersonate an officer.

"Well, what do we do next?" Chick Judge demanded eagerly. The range waif was in fine feather.

"We can't stay here," Mart said quickly. "They'll come back with rifles as soon as they have time to think it over. Maybe they won't come till night—but they'll come. We've established the fact that we were here first with stock, so there's no use of keeping the herd here just to have it slaughtered.

"Remove the bells and take the herd back the way you brought it in until you strike Rocky Ridge. Then trail along that as far as you can, for it'll be difficult for 'em to see any tracks there if they try to follow you. Then double back into Swift Canyon and up that to the fifth sub-cañon. That's a rough country and covered with big timber, so the chances are they won't find the herd."

"Goin' to run, now we've got 'em licked?" Chick demanded disgustedly.

"Certainly. We're fighting to hold the the range—not for the sake of a fight. If you fellows hadn't shot those men we'd have Jarvis on our hip," Mart stated curtly.

It was evident that his sentiments were not cordially approved.

"This place belongs to me now, and I'm going out to post notices of my homestead on the corners. When I come back I want you fellows to be gone," Mart said.

He wrote out his notices, and after considerable difficulty succeeded in finding the corner stones left by the government survey. At each stone he left a notice. Thereafter any person who came on without leave was a trespasser.

THE Jarvis and Wentworth cowpunchers seemed to have withdrawn from the vicinity, for Mart saw nothing of them. Yet he was not deceived in the least. He returned to the corrals just before dark. The men and sheep had long since gone. All was quiet except for the hoarse croaking of frogs which made the meadow fairly ring, and lent a peaceful tone to the surroundings.

The foreman made a hasty supper from food which Lem had left for him, then saddled his horse and rode into the timber. A mile from headquarters he hobbled his horse, and then crept back until he was within a quarter of a mile of the place. He wrapped a blanket about him to shut out the cold, mountain air; but he slept none at all.

About two o'clock the night stillness was shattered by a fusillade of rifle shots at headquarters. Mart knew that the cowboys had returned. The firing continued for a few minutes; then stopped for a short time; broke out again punctuated by eager yells, which changed to disappointed ones as they found the place deserted.

At the first peep of daylight Mart crawled close enough to see headquarters. Horses were turned into the pasture, and presently the negro cook, Pot-hook, came out of the cook-shack with a water bucket. These things were enough to convince Mart that the cowmen intended to stay. He returned to his horse, mounted, and was soon cutting through the hills toward Blackford.

The J W outfit was now legally a trespasser on his private property, so he was in a position to call in the law to eject them. Once the law could be compelled to take a hand at all Phillips was sure the cattle outfit would abandon the struggle. Ousted from headquarters and with range sentiment arrayed against them, their chances for ultimate success would be small.

The only things which threatened defeat of his plans, Mart reflected, were his own foolishness in losing the letters from his slicker, and the headstrong action of two of his men in shooting at the cowboys against orders. If complaint had been made to the authorities he knew he would find his hands tied at the very start. But he believed that the cow outfit would prefer to suffer its casualties in silence, and get revenge in its own grim way.

The town lay in midday silence when Mart entered. He rode at once to the office of an attorney—a land specialist.

Thirty minutes later he had completed arrangements with the attorney to sue out a writ of ejectment against the J W outfit. As he was leaving the office the attorney advised:

"If I were you I'd see those people and

let them know you got the cinch on them. The law is a slow mover, and you may not be able to get them off for a long time if you wait for it. But they may move off quietly if they know you'll eventually win."

Mart walked down the street toward a restaurant, thinking deeply. At the door of the place he almost had a collision with two men who were coming out. He knew them both. One was Huck Steadman, the other Samuel Jarvis. Jarvis was a big man, dressed in a neat-fitting business suit of good quality; his square-cut features close-shaven except for a neatly trimmed iron-gray mustache. City life was indelibly stamped upon him; yet there was something, the slightly rolling walk, perhaps, or maybe the squint of his eyes, which told of a youth spent in the saddle.

"Just a moment," Mart said.

Steadman had no mind to talk. He recognized the enemy, and his hand flew to his gun. Before the weapon was half drawn, however, he was staring down the black muzzle of a 44.

"Don't go any further," Mart warned.

"What's all this?" Jarvis snapped.

Mart had seen the cattlemen several times in Salt Lake, but he was aware that Jarvis did not know him.

"I'm peaceable," Mart said quickly. "I only want a quiet, reasonable talk with Mr. Jarvis."

"It's the foreman of that —— sheep outfit," Steadman barked furiously.

The hard, arrogant, implacable look which Mart had come to look for on cattlemen when sheep were mentioned, and on sheepmen when cattle were mentioned, settled over Jarvis' features. Even before the cattleman spoke Mart felt the futility of trying to reason with him.

"We are not discussing things with sheepmen," Jarvis said curtly.

This bitter, uncompromising hatred for the other side which both sheep and cattle men manifested was decidedly getting on Mart's nerves, but he forced himself to speak pleasantly.

"A free discussion of the case is the only thing that will avoid serious trouble," he said. "We're not trying to hog any range, so why can't we go some place and talk it over?"

"Sheep ain't entitled to any range," Huck Steadman said hoarsely. "There ain't a foot of range in this country that wasn't cattle range before the sheep come. They'd all oughter be run out."

"Surely you don't hold a fanatical viewpoint like that?" Mark asked Jarvis.

"Steadman is right. Cattle were here first. But this fight is with Bill Matthews personally. The greasy old skunk actually tried to force me into bankruptcy without me knowing who was doing it. He'd have done it, too, if I hadn't been able to make connections with another bank. There is other reasons, too, why I won't compromise with him. This fight goes the limit."

Jarvis' voice had been getting higher, and his face redder as his temper rose.

"Then listen right well, both of you," Mart exclaimed. "We not only have every moral right to that range, but we now have a legal right. The center of that range is my private land, and I have taken legal steps to expel your men. It'll be better for all concerned if you withdraw peaceably; for we'll use force if we have to to defend our rights."

"Your private land?" Jarvis exclaimed incredulously.

"By homestead," Mart informed.

"Of all the —— sheepherder tricks," Huck howled.

"It's a trick all right, old man; but we're full of 'em," Mart retorted.

"Come on," Jarvis snapped at his foreman. "We'll see about this." They strode straight toward the land office.

Mart mounted his horse and rode back to the range. He circled warily until he reached the top of the ridge which overlooked headquarters. He had already noted that the J W steers were on the range. He adjusted his field glasses and surveyed the huddle of corrals and buildings on Sunday Creek meadow. He was not at all surprized to see a number of cowboys moving about, making themselves perfectly at home.

In fact everything was exactly as he expected to find it, except that two new, white tents had been erected behind the cookshack.

Mart speculated upon the reason for them. Then the flap of one of them was raised and the mystery was explained.

Effie Matthews walked out.

Bill Matthews, evidently, had foolishly rushed to the scene of the coming encounter and brought his daughter with him.

VI

THE sheep foreman leaped to his feet with a cry of apprehension. Why, in—— name, he wondered, had Bill Matthews permitted Effie to come?

The girl was no stranger to the range. It had long been a custom with her to accompany her father there. She had always been able to twist Bill around her little finger, so to speak, but Mart's resentment flared high that Bill had not asserted his authority and made her stay at home.

It was not hard to figure out how they had got there. Evidently they had come by rail to Huttville, the closest station, then by stage to Weaver, and by buckboard from that point to headquarters—dropping innocently into the clutches of veritable wolves of the range.

Their presence at headquarters provided a complication that threatened disaster in more ways than one, Effie's danger was obvious. So was that of her father. The moment the iron-willed old sheepman found himself in the hands of his enemies he was sure to run amuck, with better than even chances of being killed. Or, if he were spared, it would be for strategical reasons. Mart squatted on his heels for a long time, but he saw no signs of his employer.

With either Matthews or Effie as a prisoner the cattle outfit would be immune from attack. They were wise enough to know, also, that the sheep must get on the range at once if at all; for once the lambing operations started there would be no moving herds. Mart knew that he must find a lambing ground within a week. He knew, too, that the law would not even have begun to move by that time.

To attempt to oust the cattlemen while the girl was in there was unthinkable. Turn the problem over in his mind as he would Mart could see no solution except to acknowledge defeat, unless he could contrive to get Bill and Effie secretly away from there, and then resort to usual range warfare methods.

It seemed to the sheep foreman that although—it almost seemed because—he abhorred violence so much the freaks of fate were conspiring to force it upon him. Violence or no he was going to make an attempt to get Effie and her father out of there, and whether it meant fighting or not; whether it was successful or not, he knew that he was going to demand an accounting of men so warped in their minds that they would use a woman as a buffer in their foolish, brutal range wars.

Mart gazed at the girl longingly as she walked slowly about on the meadow; then the big negro, Pot-hook, came out and said something to her, and she retreated hastily within the tent.

Mart swung on to his horse and headed toward the place where he had told his men to hold the wether herd. Before he reached the fifth sub-cañon, the one where he had ordered the camp to be placed, he began to feel a new uneasiness. A groan escaped him as he caught sight of the camp wagon—or what was left of it, which was nothing but the wheels of the wagon, the irons of the wagon-box, and a heat-twisted, sheet-iron camp-range.

Everything was filled with a funereal silence. Not a twig rustled, not a bird sang, not a tree-squirrel chirped. Not a thing to signify that in that cañon men had ever drunk in God's pure, free mountain air, except the pitiful remains of what had once been the shelter of strong, contented men.

Mart's first startled gaze swept through the bushes for the bodies of men, but none were to be seen. He dismounted and with a pole poked gingerly through the smoking ruins of the camp, but to his infinite relief no charred bones appeared.

He climbed back on his horse and set out to look for the herd. Half a mile up the cañon he came to the place where the cattlemen had found it. A dozen sheep carcasses marked the spot. Riding on he found dead wethers in many places; proof that the herd had been scattered and sheep shot down for idle pastime. Still there was no sign of any men.

Finally Mart found tracks of what seemed the largest bunch of the wethers, and he followed them carefully. They went to the head of the cañon, over a divide, and down through thick, heavy patches of chaparral on the other side. With considerable difficulty Mart succeeded in getting through this brush and out upon a small flat on the other side of a gulch.

The sheep appeared to have scattered all through the chaparral, except one bunch of approximately three hundred head which were huddled together on the flat in abject fear. Night had come by this time and

the blurred forms of the milling sheep were like uneasy ghosts.

Mart shouted, but the hills gave back only the echo of his voice. Again and again he called with the same fruitless results. Twenty minutes passed while he waited, hoping that one of his men might come that way hunting the sheep. Then he heard the crackling of chaparral back the way he had come, and a little later a small bunch of sheep came out and headed for the larger band on the flat. Behind them the dog, Dick, jogged back and forth, urging them steadily onward.

Mart looked eagerly for the herder but none came in sight. The dog shoved the little bunch into the larger one, hesitated a moment; then trotted around them forcing them into a more compact body. His movements seemed to lack the confidence inspired by a master. He stood still a moment, then dropped to his haunches, pointed his nose to the moon as though to indulge in a howl, but no sound escaped him.

Suddenly Mart realized what was the matter, and an ejaculation of sympathy escaped him.

"Here, Dick. Come, boy," he called.

At the sound of a human voice that he knew the dog came bounding. He reared up with his front feet on Mart's stirrup and whined softly. Mart reached down and patted the rugged head. Then he reached for his knife and slashed the leather thongs which bound the dog's jaws tightly together.

Dick gave a "whoof" of relief. It had not been at all pleasant even though he had been muzzled by his beloved master, Jack Owens. This torture of sheep dogs, however, was one of the necessary incidents of range war. Otherwise they might betray the whereabouts of their masters by their barking.

Mart was now convinced that something serious had happened to Owens. The dog would never have left him if he had been anywhere around the herd. True enough, the dog could always be depended upon to stay with the herd when Jack ordered him to do so, and the fact that Dick was doing his best to gather it together argued that Jack had told him to stay with it. Owens might have left the dog with the herd while he hid from the sheep killers, though that was unlikely; and at any rate he should have found the herd before this.

"Where's Jack, Dick?" Mart asked of the dog.

He repeated the question several times, and finally the dog started back through the chaparral, following a devious sheep trail which a man could not have found. At last they came to a small opening where was huddled another small bunch of wethers. The dog went around them and started them down the trail toward the sheep on the flat.

"No, no! Come back, Dick. Where's Jack? Find Jack!"

The dog hesitated, greatly puzzled. Once more he started toward the sheep, but as Mart called him back and reiterated "Jack" it seemed to dawn upon him what was wanted, and he set out briskly toward the top of the divide.

THE dog took the trail back to where the first sheep had been killed. There, for a time, he seemed to be at a loss as he smelled around while a low growl rumbled from his throat. At last he seemed to find what he was looking for. He set off down the side of a spur ridge with his nose to the ground, while the growl grew louder and more threatening.

After perhaps a quarter of a mile the dog stopped at a clump of fifteen or twenty majestic fir trees. Mart was not greatly surprized at what he saw there. Suspended from a huge limb on the largest tree was the lifeless body of Jack Owens.

"Oh, my God, Jack!" Mart cried bitterly. In spite of the fact that Owens had deliberately fired upon a man in defiance of his orders Mart liked him. Mart was broad-minded enough to see that the herder's hatred for cattlemen was the logical fruit of the struggle for free range.

Mart cut the rope and let the body gently to the ground. At once Dick fell to licking the cold face, while a crooning growl came from his throat.

On the herder's breast was a sheet of dirty, yellow paper. Scrawled on it in lead pencil were the words—

This is a sample of what all sheepherders will get who try to stay on the Sunday Creek Range.

Mart searched the body, and as he suspected, found a bullet wound in the man's back. Thereupon it was easy for him to visualize the tragedy. Some one, probably Dead-eye Bender, had shot Owens in the

back, though not killing him instantly. Then they had taken him to the trees to finish the job. Owens had probably left Dick with the herd, and was on his way to camp for dinner when he had been shot. The dog always obeying orders when he could understand them, had stayed with what sheep he could during the raid, and had faithfully tried to gather the rest.

"To treat a man like that!" Mart reiterated over and over in a sort of wonder. He covered the herder's face with his coat, and mounted his horse.

"Stay with Jack, Dick!" he ordered the dog, and the faithful animal lay down beside his dead master.

NATURALLY Mart wondered what had become of the other two boys. The murder of Owens showed that no mercy was to be expected from the J W outfit; either for any herders who might fall into their hands, or for Bill Matthews or his daughter. Mart formed a cold resolution that he would get Effie out of their hands if he did nothing else.

His fear and indignation did not blind his judgment. He knew that he could not ride in and get the girl out in any cavalier fashion. In fact, there was very little he could do alone. The cow outfit would be only too glad to serve him as they had Owens, and he knew very well they would be on their guard for a while at least.

He knew that the remainder of his outfit could not be far back on the trail, and the best thing that offered was to ride back and meet them, explain the situation, and get help.

He found the outfit at daybreak the following morning, having hunted for them all night. To his great amazement the first man he laid eyes upon was his employer, Bill Matthews. Mart found his head whirling.

Effie in the camp of the cow outfit entirely alone was unthinkable. Yet he could not conceive of any way for her to be there without her father, and he knew well enough that if Bill had been there he would not have been permitted to escape. Was it possible that his eyes had deceived him?

"Where's Effie?" he demanded hoarsely.

"Effie? She's gone. Gone off with that young Jarvis pup," Matthews replied. The old sheepman's face, so jolly and kindly only a few days before, was tight-drawn, and blue with bitterness.

"Are—are they married?" Mart queried, mostly because he could think of nothing else to say.

"I s'pose so," Matthews said. "She said she was goin' to marry him when I ordered her not to speak to any of the breed again."

It followed, then, that Effie had gone to headquarters with her husband, and so should be safe. But why had she and young Burt Jarvis gone there at all, and why did they not leave when they saw there would be trouble? These questions raced through Mart's mind. He felt a sort of numbing sickness creeping over him, and shook it off with difficulty.

It was rather painful to hear the girl had just been married, even though he had entertained no serious hopes of ever winning her himself. One thing was certain; her presence at headquarters made the place immune from attack by Matthews—or did it? Mart wondered if the grim old sheepman would let his hatred influence him to such an extent that he would endanger the life of his daughter. He determined to find out.

"Do you know that Effie is at headquarters?" he asked.

"What?" Matthews fairly shouted. "You mean to say that she's had the nerve to go onto my range along with them —— murderers?"

"She is there," Mart replied.

"Well, it won't be long till the whole bunch of 'em won't be there," Matthews raged. "I've got fifteen men all ready to start for there this mornin'."

"My God, man, you can't start anything with Effie in there!"

"It's her own look-out. If she's mixed herself up with that kind of scum she'll have to stand the consequences. Do you know that they raided the wether band yesterday, an' prob'ly murdered two of our men?"

"Then you've heard about that?" Mart queried.

"Yes; Lem's here."

"What about Chick?" Mart asked quickly.

"Lem don't know what become of him, but the —— murderers was chasin' him, so he's probably dead," Matthews said gloomily.

Mart knew it was of no use to plead or argue with his employer. Already several men had arrived, armed with rifles, and Matthews was busily engaged giving them

instructions. Mart quickly learned that the outfit had been side-tracked from the trail, and that all the camp-movers, and even some of the herders had been summoned to join the posse. He turned his horse loose to graze, and went into the camp to get breakfast.

While he was eating Lem Davis arrived. The haggard look on the boy's face told plainly that he had gone through a harrowing experience.

"Tell me what happened yesterday?" Mart demanded eagerly.

"I and Chick were watching the back trail, an' we saw 'em comin'," Lem explained. "We saw they was trackin' the herd along Rocky Ridge so we figured we might be able to throw 'em off, an' we shot a couple of times apiece at long range; then took to the brush in the opposite direction, makin' all the noises we could to git 'em to foller us."

"Were you afoot?" Mart asked.

"Yep. On that account we took to the thickest timber we could find, which took us toward headquarters. They split up, an' one bunch with Dead-eye Bender kept in the trail of the herd, an' the other follered us. When they got too close Chick suggested that we split up, an' we did, an' they follered Chick. I don't know what happened to him. I couldn't find him again, an' he ain't showed up here.

"I went back to camp after a while, but it was on fire. Then I tried to find Jack, but I couldn't. I found some dead sheep, though, so I figured the best thing to do was to find the outfit an' git help."

"They hung Jack," Mart observed crisply.

There was a sharp intake to breath that ran through the circle of men who had gathered to hear the story—a keener realization of the kind of job they were about to undertake. But though it sobered them, it steadied them and added to their resolution. Mart knew that he was practically powerless to prevent a raid upon the cattlemen.

"I want a fresh horse," he said.

"All right. Change with one of the men that ain't goin'," Matthews said absently.

THE change was effected and the group, sixteen in all, started for Sunday Creek. The minds of fifteen of them were busy with the problem of how to win the expected fight; that of the other sought desperately for a scheme to avoid what he was certain would spell disaster in some form if the raid were carried out.

The little band stopped on the edge of the Sunday Creek Range to eat the cold lunch which each man had brought in a flour sack tied on behind his saddle. Matthews ate apart, eyes hard, and features set and grim.

When the lunch was eaten Mart walked over to his employer.

"Look here, Bill," he said softly. "I've quit trying to persuade you to abandon this raid. Go ahead if you must, but use judgment. Let me ride down there and scout around a little first and, besides, Jack Owens is dead and unburied up there in the timber. While I scout send part of the boys to bury Jack, and let the rest of them round up the wethers."

Matthews remained silent for several minutes. Mart began to think his employer's grudge would not permit him to make even this compromise, but presently he grunted—

"All right."

Mart immediately mounted his horse and rode straight toward headquarters. There was but one thing left to do. He would make one final appeal against range intolerance—this time to young Jarvis. If this had no effect, and the cowboys still refused to move, he would warn young Jarvis of the impending raid so that he could get Effie out of the way.

The sheep foreman knew that he could expect no mercy, unless young Jarvis should intercede for him; and it was, furthermore, very doubtful if he would be listened to if he did. But the thing which really hurt was that he would be, in a way, a traitor to his own outfit, and the sheepmen's attack would be foredoomed to failure if the raid was expected.

He tried hard to look at the matter dispassionately. Good blood had already been spilled for the sake of a few acres of grass. More bloodshed seemed now inevitable. Yet the victims were interested and had all accepted the risk. It was better, he reflected, for them to face a slightly increased danger than for Effie, innocent and unwarned, to be left in a place where men's worst passions were quickly to be unloosed.

He rode out on the meadow not far below the corrals. The white tents were still

there, saddle horses grazed contentedly in the pasture, and a poker game was in progress on a saddle blanket. A quiet, pastoral scene; everything peaceful under the sun—except the vicious spleen in men's hearts.

At Mart's approach the men around the blankets sprang up, guns in hand. Mart came steadily on, eyes fixed to the front, hands conspicuously upon the horn of his saddle.

Dead-eye Bender murmured a few words to the men, and an angry buzz of conversation greeted Mart as he stopped his horse ten feet from them.

"Well, de man what said sheepherders am crazy sho' did announciate a mouf-ful," Pot-hook ejaculated. "White man, am yo' neck itchin' foh de feel of a rope?"

"I want to speak to young Jarvis," Mart said, unheedful of the negro.

"Young Ja'vis," Pot-hook said with a palpable sneer, "ain't receivin' no comp'ny right now."

A cowboy placed his hand on Mart's bridle reins.

"No familiarity, please," Mart said coolly. "Take your hand off of my bridle."

The cowboy's hand dropped from the bridle as though it had been burned, but the men closed around the horse in a grim circle. Mart's career would have been quickly terminated had not Huck Steadman appeared at that moment.

"What's that man doin' here?" Huck demanded angrily.

"I came here to have a talk with Burt Jarvis and Effie—his—his wife," Mart stammered. His confusion was caused by the pain of having to acknowledge the girl as the wife of another man, but the cowboys interpreted it as a sign of fear.

"Don't let this fellow get away, boys, until I see the boss. Mebbe he'll want to talk to him," Huck said as he moved away toward a small building which the sheep outfit had used as an office.

"Did you find your sheepherder?" Dead-eye Bender asked in so gloating a voice that Mart saw red. At the same time he noted the assassin's use of the singular, which held out the hope that Chick had in some manner managed to escape.

'I did, you —— murderer, and I'm going to see that you pay for that," Mart hurled back.

Dead-eye laughed a mirthless, triumphant, animal chuckle.

"You'll look just as sweet as he did dancin' from the end of a rope," he retorted.

Suddenly the flap of one of the tents, fifty feet away, was thrown open and Effie came out. Mart's heart bounced into his mouth and then back into the pit of his stomach, as he saw the strained, anxious look on the girl's face. It was about the first time he had ever seen her when she was not mocking something or somebody.

"Mart!" she called eagerly as she recognized him.

Mart touched his horse with his spurs to ride closer to her, but Bender seized the bridle reins and hurled the horse back on his haunches. The next second the sheepman was jerked out of the saddle, and his gun wrested from his hand. With a mighty heave Mart shook himself loose, just in time to see the negro grab Effie and throw her back inside the tent.

Mart became a madman. His fist crashed into Dead-eye Bender's jaw, and the killer went down like a stricken ox. Half a dozen more cowboys received terrific smashes, and Mart had gained twenty feet toward the tent before he was finally dragged down with three husky cowboys on top of him. He made a tremendous effort to get up, but the odds were too great.

"Let that man up," suddenly snapped an incisive voice, and Mart was permitted to stagger to his feet. His face was covered with blood and dirt, and he had to wipe hard before he could see the men who faced him. Confronting him was Samuel Jarvis, with Huck Steadman just to one side, while cowering behind them was young Burt Jarvis.

The elder Jarvis looked the disheveled sheep foreman over with studied contempt.

"Rather foolish of you to come here, wasn't it?" he asked dryly.

"Possibly," Mart conceded, studying young Jarvis intently.

"Thought you had us dead to rights when you filed that homestead, didn't you?" Samuel Jarvis sneered.

"It means we're sure to win in the long run," Mart said quietly. "It puts the law on our side."

"I'll admit that," Jarvis acknowledged with a harsh laugh. "But you see, young fellow, it is entirely wrong for you to try to introduce private property on the public range. So you're going to relinquish this so-called homestead back to the government

right away. I'll write it out, and all you'll have to do is sign on the right line."

'I think not," Mart replied steadily.

'I'm not fooling," Jarvis barked. "These boys of mine hate sheepherders worse than they do skunks, and with twice as much reason. They're plumb anxious to string you up to a tree. You deserve hanging anyway because you killed one of my men right here on this meadow before we'd fired a shot; but I'll let you go if you'll sign that relinquishment."

'You go straight to ——!" Mart said firmly.

"Then you'll hang!"

"All right!"

"Just one more chance before I turn you over to Dead-eye," Jarvis said, his face distorted with rage.

'Sheepherders have got self-respect," Mart said.

"Then you'll have to hang to prove it," Jarvis cried furiously.

"Burt, are you going to stand for this?" Mart demanded of young Jarvis.

"I can't help it," Burt wailed piteously. "We thought we could stop this foolishness if we came out here, but we can't."

"Marry a sheepherder's girl, and then think you can tell me how to run my business!" Jarvis senior snorted.

"We'd never have got married if you and Matthews hadn't got your backs up and ordered us not to have anything to do with each other. I wasn't the marrying kind," Burt said weakly.

Mart saw Effie standing in the door of her tent, listening. At her husband's confession a crimson wave swept over her face.

"Burt Jarvis, if there's any manhood at all about you, you'll get Effie out of here before night. I'm giving you straight talk. —— will be popping around here."

"The girl come here of her own accord, and now that she is here she stays here. If old Bill Matthews thinks anything of his daughter he'll keep his —— sheepherders away from here," Samuel Jarvis said with an unpleasant grin.

"You see?" Burt apologized helplessly.

"I see," Mart replied, white-faced, repressing his contempt for the sake of the girl. After all, Burt was her husband.

"He's your meat," Samuel Jarvis said to Bender.

Instantly Mart was seized again and pinioned helplessly. As he was hustled away he saw Effie start forward, only to be thrust violently back into the tent by the grinning negro.

Mart was taken over the low ridge which bounded the south side of the meadow. He was thankful that at least Effie would not be compelled to witness the gruesome tragedy.

A FIR tree, sufficiently high and strong to answer the grim purpose was quickly found. A rope was adjusted over Mart's neck while Dead-eye Bender walked around the tree to find the right limb.

Suddenly the killer chuckled, bent over and laughed outright while the men eyed him wonderingly.

"This is the best tree we could have found," he exclaimed. "I know now how to pay that —— for hittin' me in the jaw. Toss that rope over the limb right there."

The rope was tossed over in the place indicated, Mart's hands were tied behind his back, and a cowboy brought up an unsaddled horse to be led out from under the victim.

"We don't need that horse," Dead-eye said heavily.

The cowboys gazed at him wonderingly.

"String him up—an' be careful you don't hurt him," the killer ordered sarcastically.

Three men swung on to the rope and Mart was lifted clear of the ground. He reached spasmodically for the earth with his toes and they struck something, which, though not solid earth, yet held most of his weight.

"Right there. Leave him be," Dead-eye ordered. "We'll tie the rope an' let him rest on that ant hill. Purty soon the ants'll begin to bite, an' his neck'll git to hurtin'. Then he'll begin to scratch dirt, an' every time his toes hit that ant hill he'll kick a little of it down. Afterwhile he'll kick it till he can't reach it no more, an' he'll have the honor o' hangin' himself."

"Aw say, now," remonstrated a cowboy who was appalled at the brutality of the thing, "let's put him out of his misery quick."

"I say no!" Dead-eye shouted. "Any of you want to argue the point with me?"

The murderous look in the killer's red little eye was too much for the cowboys to face. Unable to watch the torture they hurried away until only Dead-eye was left.

Mart's toes began to ache, and the rope

was half-strangling him; yet he remained immovable for minutes. Finally he moved one foot to ease his position and very nearly swung into space. As he felt for the top of the ant hill again his toe scratched a track through the loose gravel which composed it.

For a moment he became panic-stricken, but he fought it down with a supreme effort of will. By exerting the utmost caution he got both feet placed again. Dead-eye laughed.

"I'm goin' to git me a drink of water. When I come back you'll be ready to scratch gravel," the degenerate taunted.

Mart heard the man moving away. Though it seemed better to let go and end the agony he remained in the position he was in with grim tenacity for what seemed hours. As long as he lived there was hope that some friend might find him.

Then a new horror seized him as he realized that the gravel was gradually squashing out from beneath his feet. He could feel it going, going, going! Soon everything seemed to be turning black—and he ceased to care.

VII

THE next Mart knew he was pumping the sweet, pure air into his famished lungs. As the peculiar sensation of unbearable pressure lessened, he became aware that he was lying on the ground, and that some one was pulling him by the hand and talking earnestly. With an effort he rolled over on his back and saw Chick Judge bending over him with an open knife in his hand.

"Mart, for the love o' sin, git goin'!" Chick implored. "That quarter-human will be back any minute, an' we ain't got a gun. Hurry!"

With Chick's assistance Mart staggered to his feet, and a thousand needles seemed to pierce each foot. They had "gone to sleep" during his recent ordeal and were just coming out of the numbed condition. Chick jerked him onward fiercely.

"Dead-eye said he'd come back—we gotta hide," Chick urged.

As Mart had suffered no real injury except the frightful choking, his recovery was rapid. In a few minutes he was able to discard Chick's assistance and run breast to breast with him. Chick seemed to know where he was going, so Mart was content to let him lead the way.

Presently they dived into a thick clump of brush. Clawing their way through this they floundered into a swamp. Though it sucked hungrily at their heels they were able to get through it to a patch of tag-alder-covered soil.

"Swamp on all sides of here—they'll never find us," Chick gasped.

"You're an angel, Chick," Mart gasped back.

"I reckon we both come near bein' angels," Chick said dryly. "Me yesterday, an' you today."

"How did you get away from them, Chick?" Mart asked.

"They chased me into the brush below here where they couldn't follow me on horseback, and I lost 'em in the swamp. Come near losin' myself—did lose my rifle."

"And since then?"

"I've been watchin' their camp. Thought maybe you fellows might come, or maybe I'd get a chance to swipe some grub, or a gun. I saw 'em hang you, and if I'd had a gun I'd have showed that one-lamped gink what a real bad-man was. If he hadn't got thirsty when he did I was just goin' to mix it with him with my knife," Chick explained in the half-serious, half-flippant manner he habitually assumed.

Mart glanced at him and knew that he was not indulging in mere vaporous language when he said he would have tried Dead-eye with his knife. Chick did not lack courage. But Mart had little time for admiration of anybody.

"They'll soon miss me, Chick, and they'll probably turn out about all hands to hunt for me. While they're doing it there may be a chance to slip in and get Effie Matt—— Jarvis out the other way. I'm going to try it. You hustle up to the cañon where the sheep were, and there you'll find Matthews and a bunch of men. Tell Bill not to attack before tomorrow because they are looking for it tonight, and I may stand a chance of getting Effie out of there if he stays back."

"All right," Chick agreed readily. Under his breath he added, "But I'll see that he don't pay a —— bit of attention to you."

Fortunately for Mart he knew the range as a housewife knows her own door-yard. The swamp was caused by the rising of

several springs in a depression in the hillside where there was not adequate drainage. He knew that he was not far from Sunday Creek, and was about a mile below headquarters. His problem, therefore, was to get out of the swamp, cross the creek, and work back up through the timber on the north side of the creek until he was opposite headquarters.

As soon as he had floundered clear of the swamp he had no difficulty in getting the rest of the way he had mapped out. When he finally reached a point from where he could spy upon the camp it was obvious that his escape had been discovered. Shouts were echoing through the timber on the other side of the meadow as the cowboys searched. Mart knew that he was, for the time, perfectly safe; but Chick was in danger of being picked up.

Only one man was in evidence around headquarters. That was the negro cook, Pot-hook, on guard before the tent where Effie was held. Yet Mart knew that young Jarvis, and probably his father and Huck Steadman were in some of the buildings. Much as he would have liked to rush in and make an attempt to rescue the girl he knew it would be folly in broad daylight. Even if he could get her away from the negro there was no safe place to which he could take her without a horse.

Mart felt that his first problem now was to filch a couple of saddle horses from the *cavy* in the pasture. Then, after dark, he would try to get at least one saddle; then make one supreme effort to get the girl, and, if it were possible, her husband.

He had no clearly defined plan except that he would try to attract her attention, and if he could get her out without attracting the attention of her guard, by slitting the back of the tent, well and good. If this could not be done he had an idea that he could quietly efface the guard.

The horse pasture reached into the timber in one place, and most of the horses had gone there in search of shade. Mart slipped quietly among them and noted that his own horse was there. The cow ponies, which always had to be lassoed, broke away in a wild run; but Mart's horse waited for him.

The cowboys had not troubled to take the saddle off before turning him into the pasture—in fact the horse appeared to have joined the other horses of his own accord, though he had scraped off his bridle. There was, however, a long rope coiled on the saddle which Mart sometimes used as a stake rope. With this he fashioned a hackamore, and led the horse out of the pasture to a place where he would be handy when needed. It was out of the question to try to capture one of the cow ponies in daylight.

Things appeared much the same when Mart returned to his spying station. Pothook still hovered close to the tents, and the cowboys had not returned, although Mart saw Huck Steadman and Burt Jarvis enter the building used as an office, where it was a safe surmise the elder Jarvis awaited them.

Mart squatted upon his heels, with his gaze glued upon the cluster of buildings, corrals, and tents. His watching was almost automatic, for he saw everything, though his mind was engaged in trying to reason a way out of the dilemma. Heretofore he had tried hard to keep an open mind—to think fairly—but it was growing more and more difficult. Not the least among the things which influenced him to yield to bitter, partisan views was a stiff, burned neck.

"Free Range!" The words sickened him. With an increasing number of stock, and a constantly diminishing range supply it was a difficult problem at best; but with every rangeman swayed solely by bitter, unreasoning prejudice what was the use of one man trying to keep an open mind? Almost insensibly the peculiar state of mind of the killer crept over him, as reason slowly gave way to impulse.

Suddenly there was a chorus of wild yells from the timber on the other side of the meadow. A volley of rifle shots shattered the evening air, and sixteen men rushed out of the timber in a wild run for the buildings. Leading them, hatless and coatless, his grizzled hair and beard tossing in the wind was old Bill Matthews.

Mart leaped to his feet. The sight of his best friends removed the last of his nonpartisan state of mind. The lust for battle flowed over him. Unarmed as he was he started forward to join in the fight. Immediately there came two shots from the office, and a sheepherder went down on all fours, to crawl a few steps and collapse. Bill Matthews reeled, clutched a shoulder with one hand, but recovered himself and came on.

Then something happened which caused Mart to lose his blood lust. Mere frenzy gave place to cold, fighting resolution. The new element that had been injected into the situation required resourcefulness and cool-headness—something that was not compatible with blind hate.

The moment the sheepherders broke from cover Pot-hook had leaped into the tent he was guarding. In a moment he came out with Effie in his arms. In a moment he had put the buildings between himself and the advancing sheepherders, and bounded toward the timber in an ungainly but rapid lope, straight to where Mart stood—unarmed.

Mart could see the ugly grin on the negro's face as he ran. For the sheep foreman to show himself would be suicide. A big .45 swung at the negro's hip, and there was no doubt that he was willing and able to use it.

Mart slipped behind a bush, knowing that his only chance was to take the negro unaware. His eyes flitted for a moment toward the meadow where the battle was going on, and he saw young Burt Jarvis break from the office. The latter rushed wildly toward the tent where his wife had been, but just before reaching it he saw the negro running away with her. With a distressed cry he started to follow, but he was not shrewd enough to put the buildings between himself and the sheepherders as Pot-hook had done. Chick Judge dropped to one knee, took careful aim and fired.

Young Jarvis leaped high in the air and came down in a pitiful huddle. Fate had been against him. Chick had been the only sheepherder to see him, and he only because being unarmed at the start he had stopped to get the rifle of the first sheepherder who had fallen.

Two men in a flimsy frame building were powerless to stop the rush of more than a dozen wild, revenge-seeking men. But Mart knew that in a few minutes the beseigers would be the besieged. The cowboys would hear the shooting and come back. As the timber was not far from the buildings on that side they would have all the advantage.

Pot-hook gained the shelter of the timber with a triumphant grin. He held the girl so tightly that her only movement was the frantic kicking of her feet. The negro changed his course slightly and the new direction took him straight toward the place Mart had left his horse. The negro was now covering the ground at a swift trot, and as Mart swung in behind he found it difficult to keep up without making noise.

Finally Mart had succeeded in getting within two rods of the negro without being suspected; but he knew that he could not get any closer without making sounds that the negro would hear. He threw discretion to the winds and took those two rods at top speed.

Pot-hook heard him. He dropped the girl to the ground and whirled, his only hand clawing for his gun. He was not a clever gunman and fumbled the draw. Then, when Mart was almost upon him, he quit the gun, and a long bladed knife appeared in his hand as if by magic.

Swift as Pot-hook had been in getting the knife out of his shirt, he was not fast enough to use it before Mart struck him with the full force of his body in a terrific lunge. They went down together; Mart on top. Mart locked arms with the negro's right arm, but the hand that grasped the knife was slippery as a snake.

Although Pot-hook was considerably heavier than his opponent, it seemed that his missing hand, which was cut off just below the elbow, would be a hopeless handicap. But Mart did not find it so to the extent he had anticipated. He quickly found that the negro's game was to stay on the ground.

Suddenly Mart felt an agonizing twinge in the muscles of his back, and he was drawn down breast to breast with his opponent.

"Ah fastens mah hook into you, shep', den Ah jus' nachually whittles you up into small chunks foh de ki-utes to chaw on," Pot-hook grunted triumphantly.

Try as he would Mart could not pinion the hand that held the knife. And the pain from the terrible hook in his back was getting unbearable.

With a final frantic effort he heaved himself up, suffering excruciating torture from the increased drag of the hook, but he managed to jerk up a knee and plant it in the negro's stomach. The same moment the knife made a red trail through the flesh of his forearm. With another heave he jerked loose, this time tearing away from the fearful hook.

They sprang to their feet simultaneously, and Pot-hook charged, waving the knife,

and bellowing like a bull. Mart now realized that so far the negro had had the better of the contest, and that despite his missing hand was a formidable opponent even without the advantage of the knife. If the negro was to be defeated it would have to be by superior head-work.

Mart gave ground steadily in his efforts to avoid the wild slashes of the razor-edged knife. Again and again Pot-hook rushed, but each time the white man avoided the knife—sometimes by mere hair's-breadth. Twice Mart leaped in and drove a hard fist into the black, sweating face; but that only served to make the negro more cautious.

Mart attempted a hard jolt to the stomach for a change. He ducked below the swinging knife and landed, but as he started back he felt the hook on the negro's left hand grab into his belt. He was jerked violently forward.

DESPERATELY Mart twisted sidewise and seized the wrist of the negro's right arm with both hands. For a moment they were poised in a sheer contest of strength, Mart's two arms against the black man's one. The white man was amazed that one arm could contain so much strength. The three upraised arms vibrated slowly back and forth, and it was more of a victory for will power than for muscle when the black arm suddenly relaxed.

Mart was swift to take advantage of it. He swung half-around and brought his shoulder under Pot-hook's elbow with the intention of throwing him over his shoulder and dislocating the arm. But he did not give the heave. The knife dropped to the ground, and the negro gave a wild yell and went limp.

"Lemme loose, lemme loose!" he howled. "Yo' twistin' mah a'm off. Oh, ——!"

At first Mart suspected a trick; then it dawned upon him that the hook had fastened in the heavy, silver belt buckle. The hook, of course, was securely fastened to the stump of the arm. In turning Mart had twisted the hook so that the fastenings on the stump were inflicting torture, and Pot-hook could not get loose.

Mart let go of the negro's wrist with one hand and appropriated the revolver which still hung in the holster at Pot-hook's hip.

"Don't make a move, Pot-hook, or off goes your head," he warned. Then he slowly turned back until the hook could be unfastened. With a gasp of relief the negro dropped to the ground where he lay regarding his conqueror with wild eyes and ashen face.

"Get up!" the white man ordered, and Pot-hook slowly got to his feet. "Face that tree!"

The negro obediently faced the tree.

Mart saw Effie standing by the side of his horse in a half-dazed condition. Keeping one eye on the negro he picked up the knife, and went over to her. He cut the gag which had kept her silent and then whacked off about fifteen feet of the horse's picket rope. Then he slipped the gun into his holster and proceeded to lash the negro firmly to the tree. The wretched colored man, convinced that he was going to be burned to death began to make the woods ring with his incoherent pleadings for mercy.

Effie touched Mart on the shoulder. He turned and saw that she had recovered her faculties, but her eyes were filled with horror.

"Mart, you are not—not going to do that?" she implored.

"I don't know what I'll do till the time comes," he said bruskly. "I'll let him roost there till I go back and finish the rest of that rumpus. But first you get on that horse and ride to where you can see the main traveled road. If your father don't come in an hour you'd better hit the trail for Blackford. You know the road."

"But father—and—and you?" she faltered.

Mart noted that she did not mention her husband, but he let it pass without comment.

"I'm going back to see what's become of him," Mart responded more gently. "If you don't want to stay here with Pot-hook you had better get on that horse."

Effie swung into the saddle without a word. She looked at the sheep foreman as if to speak, but her gaze fell upon the repulsive-looking negro. She shuddered and rode away.

VIII

RELIEVING the negro of his cartridge belt, Mart strapped it on and hurried toward the scene of the fighting. As he had anticipated, the cowboys had come back and from the shelter of the timber on the south side of the meadow were pouring a withering fire into

the flimsy cook-shack where the sheepherders had taken refuge.

The building was being literally torn to pieces by bullets, and as all the buildings had been constructed of native lumber from a small movable saw-mill there was nothing more substantial to get into.

While he was pondering just what to do, he saw a form emerge from one of the corrals west of the buildings and begin to slink furtively from post to post toward the cook-shack. Only a short distance from the shack was a huge boiler used to heat the dipping vat. Obviously the man was heading for that. Here he would be safe from the cross-fire of the cowboys, and would be able to snipe at the men in the cook-shack with deadly effect.

The man was Dead-eye Bender.

For the moment Mart forgot everything else in his desire to have it out with the scourge of the range. Running low he cut straight across the meadow toward the boiler. Bender was too busy watching the cook-shack to see him, though some of the cowboys in the timber did, for several bullets sang unpleasantly close. In a moment the cook-shack was between him and the men in the timber, and a bit later he reached the east side of the boiler just as Dead-eye Bender slid up to the west side. Not until that moment did Bender know that he had been observed.

Now began a grim game of hide-and-seek. Bender could not retreat, nor could he take a chance on getting between the boiler and the cook-shack. Several times he stuck his gun around a corner and fired, but his shots went wild. Once he endeavored to climb to the top of the boiler, but Mart was on the alert, and the gunman's hat went spinning.

It being physically impossible to watch both ends of the boiler at once, Dead-eye determined to take a chance on being seen from the cook-shack. He slipped around the south end of the boiler, poked his head swiftly around the corner, and saw Mart just disappearing around the north end. Leaping to his feet and crouching low he raced along the east side of the boiler for a chance to shoot Mart in the back.

At that moment Lem Davis in the cook-chack looked back over his shoulder and took in the situation at a glance. He leaped to a back window and fired hastily. The bullet missed Dead-eye's head by an inch and ricocheted off the iron boiler with an angry whine.

Dead-eye gained the north end of the boiler with unseemly haste. Peering around the west side he perceived that Mart had gained the opposite end. He felt himself cornered and the slaver ran from the corners of his mouth. He could not watch both ways at once, and he had no doubt that his enemies would attack from both ways.

Such, indeed, was Lem's plan, but Mart waved the boy back in the shack. Then Mart continued his circle of the boiler. Bender, meanwhile, had made up his mind to go on around the boiler on the chance of surprizing at least one of his foes. As Mart turned the northwest corner he saw the broad back of the gunman half-way down the west side. He could have driven a bullet—or two of them—into the man's back had he wished. Instead, he coughed.

Bender leaped erect and whirled in the same movement. His gun leaped out horizontally like a released spring. But the itching finger on the trigger closed too late. The bullet went wild. By an infinitesimal period of time Mart had beaten him on the draw from an even start. Dead-eye pitched forward on his face, a small, blue hole in the center of his forehead.

Mart left the gunman where he lay, and rushed inside the cook-shack. Several sheepherders lay groaning on the floor, and the pine sheeting on the side of the shack was splintered in many places by the bullets of the cowboys.

KNEELING by one of the holes was Bill Matthews, his face distorted with fury and his shirt dripping blood from a flesh wound in the shoulder. He was pumping bullets toward the timber as fast as he could load and fire.

Lashed firmly to the base of the big kitchen range were Samuel Jarvis and his foreman.

Mart touched his employer on the shoulder. Matthews whirled angrily.

"We've got to stop this," Mart said.

"Not as long as we've got a bullet left," Matthews snarled.

"I'm going to run up a white flag," Mart said firmly. "We've got the leaders and we can make 'em come to time; but if we keep this up they'll pick us off one by one."

"If you hang out a white rag I'll shoot you," Matthews raged.

"Lem, run up a white cloth of some kind," Mart ordered.

The next moment he grappled with his employer. The wild-eyed old sheepman was not difficult for Mart to handle though he struggled fiercely until he was flat on his back. Then he collapsed utterly.

The cowboys had ceased firing at sight of the white flag, and the sheepherders who were still able to fight were ready to quit. The cowboys gave one exultant whoop of victory, but none of them came out in sight—possibly because they lacked a leader.

"Well, Jarvis," Mart addressed the owner of the cattle outfit, "you and your foreman are prisoners. Dead-eye Bender is dead. So, incidentally, is your son. I still own this land. Are you ready to be reasonable?"

At the mention of his son's death Jarvis flinched. Then his eyes traveled toward Matthews and filled with venom.

"He caused my boy to get killed!" he said.

"He did not!" Mart said sharply. "You are your boy's murderer with your —— hoggishness for range! Matthews has to answer for putting his girl in a worse fix than you did your boy."

"Effie! My God, Mart, where's Effie?" Matthews quavered.

"Pot-hook, ran into the brush with her as soon as you started this fight," Mart replied unfeelingly, purposely withholding the sequel.

Bill Matthews leaped bolt upright, and a look of horror overspread his face.

"Say—say that again," he quavered.

"I saw the nigger, Pot-hook, running into the brush with Effie. She was gagged," Mart repeated unfeelingly.

The color left Matthews' face until it was as pale as slacked lime. With a look of dumb misery he staggered toward the door. Mart headed him off.

"What can you do now?" he demanded. "That happened an hour ago. The best you two noble fathers can do now is to settle this question of free range, which is of so much more importance than your children."

The sheep baron and the cattle baron faced each other with blanched faces and horror-stricken eyes.

"My God, Bill, what have we done?" Jarvis faltered in a husky, half-whisper.

"We're murderers, Sam—the lowest, blackest kind of murderers—both of us," Matthews whispered back. They looked into each other other's eyes and each saw in the guilty, remorseful look of the other the sort of man he was himself. "We've murdered your boy—an'—an'—worse than murdered my girl."

"Bill—I'd—I'd—gladly die this minute—by torture if need be—to bring your girl back here—safe," Jarvis moaned.

Mart felt a pang of pity for the two abject, grief-stricken men; but he still refrained from telling them the truth.

"Not only has our hoggishness destroyed our own flesh and blood, but we've made murderers out of other men," Jarvis went on brokenly. "There is no real harm in these other boys—cowboys or sheepherders—if it wasn't for us to set the example. Even degenerates like Dead-eye and Pot-hook would be powerless to harm if it wasn't for these range wars giving them a chance to exercise their depravity."

"That's the truth," Matthews agreed remorsefully.

"Well, we must get Effie—or—or that nigger," Jarvis cried, getting his feelings under control.

Both men started for the door, but again Mart interfered.

"You see what you've accomplished—now fix it so that it can't happen again—before you leave this building," he ordered curtly.

"—— the range; he can have it," Matthews cried disgustedly.

"No; you take it," Jarvis cried hastily. "You need it all to lamb on, and besides the land belongs to your foreman. I'll have Huck crowd our cattle in somewhere else—where we won't have to fight."

"Like —— you will," Huck Steadman spoke up out of the bitterness of years of unreasoning prejudice. "If you're goin' to be licked by a rotten sheep outfit I quit right here. You run cattle right here before the sheep come, an' we run from 'em to avoid trouble. Then they run us off our last range. Now when we come back to our old range that rightly belongs to us you say to run again. If you're always goin' to be a coward I'm done with ye."

"If you'd lost your only son—" Jarvis began. "I know," he went on, "you ain't had anything to jar you out of the rut. You can have your time."

"I reckon we can make room for your cattle here till you can get a new foreman,

and find a new range," Mart said. He cut old Huck Steadman loose, and with a contemptuous grunt the old cattleman strode away—hating sheepherders to the last.

Jarvis went outside and called his men in. They listened to him wonderingly. Carefree and indifferent as they were, most of them accepted peace as tranquilly as they had accepted war. One of them summed up the attitudes of the mere privates on both sides when he said—

"If we're all goin' to be friends what the —— did we waste all them bullets for?"

Young Burt Jarvis was dead. So was a sheepherder, and another, Chick Judge, was dying.

"It don't matter much," Chick said indifferently. "I'm wanted for a lot of things out in civilization that'ud send me up for most of my life anyway. I just want to say, though, that it was me that shot that cowboy the other day against Mart's orders, so don't blame it on Lem."

Mart had suspected this before, but Chick's dying words brought him face to face with another problem. Peace had been established between the outfits concerned—but what about the law! Legally there was not a man on either side who was not guilty of manslaughter at the very least.

If the case had to be fought over again in the courts he knew that renewed bitterness would result. Not only that but all over the country cattle and sheep men would takes sides. It seemed better from every standpoint to let the matter drop where it stood. County officials in those days were inclined to wink at range scraps unless one side or the other made complaint, accompanied by political influence, so Mart knew that by the exercise of a little tact and discretion by all concerned the whole incident would be officially ignored.

The foreman winced a little at the thought that he, who had been the first one and only one concerned to appeal to the law, should now be the one to propose cheating it of its just dues. He consoled himself a little by the reflection that it was the foolishness of the law that was primarily responsible for the trouble. Sheep and cattle would no more mix than oil and water, yet the grab-it-all range policy threw them indiscriminately upon the same range.

Mart cautioned the men to keep silent on the matter, and dispatched a cowboy on a fast horse to Blackford to get a doctor. Then he surprized Bill Matthews by telling him he could meet Effie.

"Where's that —— nigger?" Bill screamed.

"Never mind," Mart retorted. "We're going in for romance and glory on this range, and we'll do a clean job of it."

Pot-hook was still praying when Mart sought him.

"Pot-hook," he said, "if I cut you loose where will you go?"

"Away f'om heah, shep'," Pot-hook said earnestly.

Mart slashed the rope.

The SALVING OF THE BERWICK

A Complete Novelette by Albert Richard Wetjen

Author of "Under the Skin," "The Unforeseen," etc.

THE road outside was dun-colored and dusty, baking hot under the fierce noonday sun. But the interior of the little marine store was hotter and dustier yet, though the sun's rays were strangers to the gloom. Red Isaac came from the space at the back of the store, rubbing his hands together and smiling in what was meant to be a genial manner. He had not had a customer all the morning; and the sight of the tall, square-shouldered figure standing the other side of the broad, stained counter was very welcome indeed.

"Goot mornin'," ventured Red Isaac.

He fondled the flaming beard that graced his chin and gave him his nickname, with one long-fingered hand. Then his eyes brightened and his smile grew more genuine as he recognized the other.

"Vy, Captain Larson!" he said.

"The guess is right," the captain smiled; and, nodding, he removed his broad-brimmed straw hat and fanned himself.

He was a man of middle age with a rather square, bulldog jaw and eyes of a very light blue. His dress was neat and simple—a pair of white duck trousers, canvas shoes, a cotton singlet, and a white duck jacket. He was very tanned, and his hair and heavy mustache showed traces of long years in the tropics, being bleached to a sandy color.

"Want to talk business," he said shortly, his smile fading.

Red Isaac's face lengthened a trifle. Business could mean only that the captain needed a loan of some sort. When he had money he usually walked into the store, ordered what he wanted in a crisp tone, paid for it and went away without any unnecessary words.

Red Isaac shrugged after a moment's consideration, and, opening the little door in the counter, waved toward the back of the store where he lived. He carefully closed the counter door behind the captain and then followed him slowly.

A folding bed with the dirty, rumpled sheets flung in a pile at one end, a rough wooden table and three rougher broken chairs, a small iron safe, an oil stove and a few cheap prints on the damp-mottled walls were practically all the furnishings the back of the store contained. Light trickled feebly through a grimy, cobwebby window and shone on a high barrier of coils of new rope that parted the store proper from the small living-portion. A narrow opening in the rope barrier served as a door.

Red Isaac, in his dilapidated costume, consisting of a faded red dressing-gown and a pair of light straw slippers, fitted well into the room. His shock of red hair

was uncovered, and when he walked a hint of dirty white pajamas flickered to view from beneath the dressing-gown. The captain towered above him by at least six inches and looked cool and clean by comparison.

"Sit down, captain," Red Isaac purred.

The captain sat down and drummed with thick, strong fingers on the brim of his straw hat, which he held across his knees.

"I want stores," he commenced abruptly. "I want enough stores for a short cruise. I also want some dynamite, a couple of crowbars, some new sails, rope and a few extras. Can you let me have 'em?"

Red Isaac shuffled the length of the room and back again. His little eyes gleamed thoughtfully.

"Ven do you pay?" he asked, stopping before the seated captain.

"Very probably in three weeks. At the latest in six."

"But vy nod now? You sell to me seven hundred ton of shell vun veek ago."

"I know. But listen. I've got a good thing on, Isaac. All I need to clean up on it is a few stores. That last cruise of mine cleaned me out. The money I got from you for the shell I put into the *Berwick*. I bought the wreck."

"The *Berwick*?"

Red Isaac's voice became almost a wail.

"Vy, captain, she vas a total loss!"

"Yaa, so the crew said," the captain drawled, still drumming on his hat-brim.

He smiled reflectively and stared up at the damp-spotted ceiling across which a huge spider was scuttling energetically.

"She piled up on a reef near Mondrain Island in the Recherche Archipelago. That's three hundred miles from here, as you know. I met the *Berwick's* second mate in Perth two months back, and he told me the old hooker was stuck high on the reef when they abandoned her. The seas were sweeping her fore and aft, and she was expected to go to pieces any minute. But she didn't."

"The underwriters paid full insurance," Red Isaac objected.

"Sure, they thought she was a total loss. So would any decent man who knows this coast. Listen: the other day I spoke to a feller who gets a fool living by fishing hereabouts. He told me there was a ship wrecked near Mondrain Island. Her name was the *Berwick*. He went aboard her a week back to see what he could find. Savvy? She's above water yet."

"But vy should you vant to buy her?"

Red Isaac was indignant that a man should waste good money buying a wreck, and an apparently worthless wreck. Also he was indignant that the captain should think him such a fool as to invest money of his own in such a venture.

"Do you know what the *Berwick* carried besides tallow and ore?"

The captain leaned forward slightly and lowered his voice. He ceased to drum on his hat-brim. Red Isaac grew suddenly very much interested, scenting a mystery, something behind the buying of the wreck of the steamer about which he knew nothing.

"One hundred thousand pounds, all in pearls," the captain whispered tensely.

A slight perspiration broke out on Red Isaac's brow. He licked his suddenly dry lips and gulped. He even forgot to rub his hands together. Instead he gripped the captain's knee with iron fingers and shook him slightly.

"Vun hundred thousand?" he said in an awed voice.

The captain nodded and grinned.

"It's in a part of the hull, or rather on the deck, where you'll never find it," he stated confidently. "Not even if you searched for a million years. That's why I'm not leary of telling you; see, Isaac?"

"But if I stake you ve go on a vifty-vifty share," Red Isaac insisted, suddenly becoming all business. "That is the agreement vor grubstake."

"I'll give you a thousand quid flat."

The captain laughed.

"I hold all the cards in this deal, Isaac. A thousand quid, no more."

"Vifty-vifty," Red Isaac repeated obstinately. Then he grew suspicious.

"If dere vas that much aboard they vould search the wreck and vind it, no?"

"Well, if you're going to talk that fifty-fifty stuff I'm not going into long details," the captain remarked. He rose to his feet and jammed his thin straw hat over his eyes.

"Good-by."

Red Isaac leaped forward and caught the other by the arm as he made for the opening through the rope barrier. A thousand pounds was not to be sneered at. Better that than nothing.

"Vait, captain, vait. You nod give time to say!"

"Well—" the captain appeared to think the matter over for a moment—"I know I can get stores off Charley the Greek, if I promise him a thousand quid. But if you think you can——"

"Vy, a thousand pounds! To be sure, captain, to be sure. Sit down and talk things over. But explain. For such an amount I must know."

The captain grinned and returned to his chair. He had seen Charley the Greek previously, and that surly individual had refused to take a chance. He removed his headgear again and dropped it to the floor beside the chair as he sat down. Then he shuffled his chair nearer to Red Isaac, who bent forward once more to listen.

"You have heard of old Cap'n Mulvaney who owned the *Berwick?*" the captain commenced. "But did I ever tell you I was once a partner of his? I was, and I owned a half-share in the old tub before we split up, too.

"Now on his last trip Mulvaney did some pearl-poaching in a place that needn't be named, and he made a big haul. He had to beat it from the banks *pronto* because half a dozen cruisers were on his tail. I don't know where he coaled for the run, but he did somewhere, and he managed to reach Port Darwin in safety. He got a legitimate cargo aboard for Adelaide and then sailed south.

"Now, after the wreck I met his second mate, Trelawney, in Perth. Mulvaney and half the crew were dead; you know they got drowned while abandoning ship. The second mate, Trelawney, was telling me how Mulvaney double-crossed his men over the pearls. He had them hidden somewhere aboard and wouldn't cough up.

"The crew mutinied, and there was a bloody fight just off this coast with the result that the *Berwick*, left unwatched, ran on to the reef during a gale and stayed there. What was left of the crew got out in a hurry. But they never got the pearls.

"This is where I come in. When I was with Mulvaney we were running opium into Canada, and we had a little place made in which to hide the stuff. Savvy?

"Now I've staked every penny I've got on a bet that Mulvaney hid the pearls in the hiding-place we used to use for opium. There were only two of us knew of it. Mulvaney's dead. I'm not. So I get the pearls if I've guessed right.

"I'm giving you a thousand pounds to stake me with a few hundred pounds' worth of stores and to keep your mouth shut. That clear? And don't forget, if you feel like monkey tricks, that the wreck now belongs to me legally."

Red Isaac drew back a little and straightened up. His keen eyes were gleaming, and with one hand he combed his greasy, flaming beard.

There was first the chance that Mulvaney had not hidden the pearls in the secret hiding-place. And secondly there was the chance that the *Berwick* had slid into deep water and was unsalvable. In either case the loss of several hundred pounds' worth of stores was nearly certain, for Captain Larson was broke. But he would pay some time. His name and credit were reasonably good.

Finally Red Isaac grunted and, evading the captain's straight glance, peered toward the barrier of new rope coils.

"Your ship is lying vere, captain?" he asked.

"In Bramley Cove, twelve miles west of here."

"Vell, I vill send the stores around tomorrow early in a vale-boat. You vill start at vunce, eh?"

"Just as soon as I get fixed up."

"Good. Then ve vill get papers vixed up virst and signed. Vere did you say the pearls vere hidden?"

The latter question was so sharp that the captain was taken off his guard for a moment.

"In the mast by— What the ——'s the game, Isaac? God help you if you double-cross me in any way! I wasn't going to tell you that."

Red Isaac was all humbleness.

"How shall I double-cross you? Am I not to receive vun thousand pounds for a vew stores? A good provit, a good provit! Be kviet, captain. I shall not speak— And the pearls is in the mast, eh?"

"Yaa," the captain growled wrathfully.

He was sorry he had let the words escape him. He knew Isaac.

"But that's enough. It doesn't matter a —— to you where the stuff is so long as you get your thousand."

"Of course not, of course not."

Red Isaac spread out his hands and smiled in a meant-to-be-genial-and-innocent manner. He rose slowly from his

chair, and his red dressing-gown swept the dusty floor.

"But tomorrow you may look vor the valeboat and my launch."

"All right."

The captain rose himself and stood for a moment thinking and twisting his straw hat between his hands. He frowned. Then he turned abruptly on his heel and made for the opening in the rope barrier and the store beyond.

"Good-by," he called back shortly.

Red Isaac returned a soft, "Good-by" and smiled to himself for a long time.

CAPTAIN CUSH LARSON walked down the road and surveyed the little water-front with the frown still on his brow. Behind him lay the little town of Albany on the shores of Oyster Harbor on the southwest coast of Australia. Beyond the harbor the waters of King George Sound shimmered in the sunlight and crisped under the trade wind.

There were two ships in sight, both of them swinging at anchor in the harbor itself. One was a two-masted, somewhat grimy-looking schooner with her sails hanging in untidy bights, her spars and masts badly in need of scraping and greasing and her rigging, both standing and running, as badly in need of repair. Her name, the *Kaufua*, painted in big white letters across the undercut stern, could be plainly seen from the shore.

The other vessel was a steamer, a rusty-looking craft with a raking smokestack and two rakish masts. She had a schooner-cut prow and a cruiser stern and had once been a yacht. But now she was ingloriously engaged on the south Australian coasting-run, carrying anything that offered a fragment in the way of profit. She plied between Adelaide and Fremantle. Her name was in faded gold letters on the bow but could not be seen from the wharf at all.

After a minute's reflection of the harbor Captain Larson dropped down the few steps into his whaleboat tied to the wharf, and, muttering a few words to the two Kanakas who formed the crew, seated himself in the stern sheets. The brown men let go the painter and, pushing from the wharf-side, hoisted the lugsail and rowed the boat out to where it could catch the breeze. Then the white-painted, sturdy craft sped away, out of the harbor and down the coast to where Captain Larson's vessel, the *Day Dream*, lay.

WHEN the captain had disappeared, Red Isaac remained for a long time in thought. Then he appeared to come to some deep thought-out resolution, and a pleasant smile crept to his lips. He rubbed his hands together rapidly, chuckled and danced a few steps across the room, his faded red dressing-gown flapping grotesquely.

Then he became deadly serious. A call from him brought a starved-looking native urchin into the store, and a few short words sent the boy scuttling away on some errand. He was gone for perhaps half an hour, and in the mean time Red Isaac prepared the living-part of the store for the reception of visitors.

He drew the three chairs up to the table, and then salvaged four dirty-looking glasses from a cupboard together with a bottle of gin and two bottles of lukewarm soda-water. These things, with the addition of a box of somewhat fly-specked cigars, he placed on the table and then sat down to await his guests.

There was a thud-thud of shoes on the broad, shady veranda in front of the store after a while, the rumble of voices, the sound of spitting, rough laughter; and then three men stamped into the store and made their way through the opening in the rope barrier to the back. They were all unshaven, somewhat burly ruffians, arrogantly healthy and strong. Each wore a thin cotton singlet, value perhaps one shilling, a pair of much washed blue dungaree pants, and rope-soled canvas shoes, such as sailors make in their spare time.

They greeted Isaac somewhat curtly, nodding to him with no show of pleasure, their rough laughter ceasing as soon as they entered the room. They removed their floppy straw hats simultaneously.

Red Isaac rose and waved toward the three chairs and smiled reassuringly.

"Be seated, chentlemen, be seated," he said smoothly. "Vy you look so dark? I call you here to make your fortune."

The leader of the three, a broad-shouldered, red-headed giant with intense blue eyes and a three-days' growth of red beard on his chin, flung himself into a chair with a curt, "What is it?"

"Vun hundred thousand pounds in pearls," Red Isaac flung back softly.

Bud McGowan sat up abruptly and stared. Without a word his two companions dropped into the vacant chairs and stared also. The Jew alone was unmoved, standing before them rubbing his hands and chuckling softly to himself. He had accomplished with the three men what Captain Cush Larson had accomplished with him—flabbergasted them.

"Sun been too hot today?" inquired the smallest of the newcomers sarcastically after a while.

His name was Clew Lann, and he was a sailor from the top of his bald, sunburned head to the tips of his tattooed fingers. His eyes were gray, his sparse hair yellow; but, strangely enough, the light beard-growth on his chin was a golden brown.

The third man said not a word. He was a thin, stringy individual with a prominent jaw and nose and a somewhat bluish complexion. His lips were big and coarse, and his dull slate eyes gleamed with latent cruelty. Withal he gave an impression of huskiness, and he was listening intently to all that passed. His companions knew him as Tim Farrel, but the name somehow didn't fit him.

"I'm nod crazy."

Red Isaac ignored the sarcasm of Clew Lann.

"Five hundred pounds you owe to me, and I hold a note on your ship."

Bud McGowan snorted wrathfully.

"Have you called us right from the *Kaufua* just to tell us that? That's ancient history, and it's like your —— check!"

"Gif me time, time," Red Isaac protested. "Listen. A man was here today with a tale of vun hundred pounds, thousands, in pearls. It is in a place that I know now, and it is vor you to go and take it. Vor this you shall receive vun-half between you, vile I shall take the other half. Also I shall come vith you to see that you play vair."

"Who does the stuff belong to?" Clew Lann put in abruptly after a short silence, his eyes narrowing.

Red Isaac shrugged and grimaced.

"To any man. It vas gained vrom poaching, vich is illegal, and the real owner is dead."

"Something's very fishy for you to offer us fifty thousand quid just to go and get the stuff. Where's the nigger in the woodpile?" Tim Farrell rasped in his cold and unpleasant voice.

His aspect was sour as if he suffered from dyspepsia, which he did.

"Does that matter?" grunted Red Isaac with a semblance of irritation. "Since ven have you asked such? Vy, you go gun-running, you go poaching yourself, you steal men's ships, and— Nefer mind.

"But if you must know, the man I had news vrom vas Cush Larson. He was a partner of Cap'n Mulvaney of the old *Berwick*—you know she vas wrecked hereabouts months ago—and he had it vrom Mulvaney's second mate that the old cap'n had vun hundred thousand in pearls poached vrom somewhere. And he held them out on the crew, so they mutinied. That vas vy the *Berwick* she get wrecked. Mulvaney drown, many others drown, and the rest get avay, but nod vith the pearls.

"Now Cush Larson he knows where there's a hiding-place on the *Berwick*. He said he vas vith Mulvaney ven it vas made. Savvy?

"He vent and bought the wreck and spent all his money doing that. Then he come to me vor stores. I tell him all right, I send along stores. Then I vind out where the hiding-place is and send him avay. After that I call you. Dere is nothing to it. Vifty thousand pounds vor nothing."

Clew Lann grunted and stood up. He scratched his bald dome and reached for his hat on the floor beside him.

"Did you say Cush Larson?" he asked distinctly.

Red Isaac nodded.

"Man tall, broad, with a light-colored mustache? About forty years old?"

Again Red Isaac nodded.

Clew Lann wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

"Good-by," he quoth, jamming his straw hat on his bald dome with some force. "If old Larson's interested in the deal, I'm not! Didn't know he was on the coast. I bucked him in New Zealand seven years ago. Wouldn't do it again for fifty thousand quid all to myself."

He made for the opening in the rope barrier.

Bud McGowan stretched forth an impatient hand.

"Wait a bit, Lann. Are you quitting us?"

The other turned and squinted across the room.

"I am if you fellers are going t' try and buck Larson. You don't know him! I do!"

"Aw, he can't be so —— bad. Come here and listen to reason. Fifty thousand is a —— of a nest-egg."

"Nope. Nothin' doin'. I'll see you aboard the schooner later on when I go for my dunnage unless you decide not to take up Isaac. So-long."

He disappeared. McGowan swore as he heard his partner's shoes *thud-thud* on the veranda and then become muffled by the dust of the road. He looked at Farrel. That thin individual shook his head slowly and pursed his lips.

"Clew always was a bit too scared to do anything worth while. 'Member how he turned us down on that sealing proposition? Not much good to us. Let him go."

He turned to Red Isaac.

"Go ahead, Isaac."

McGowan nodded thoughtfully and poured himself another drink.

"Yes, we can do without Clew if it comes to that. Hope he doesn't start talking about what he's heard already, though. Go ahead, Isaac. We owe you a bunch of money, and we're broke besides. If you can guarantee us some dough we'd be obliged. I don't know this Larson chap, and I don't want to. And if he was the devil himself he couldn't keep me away from fifty thousand quid anyway."

"Same here," Tim Farrell approved; and with a satisfied grin the Jew went on with his plans, the other two men listening intently.

It sounded simple enough. They were grinning when they left the marine store and already spending their fifty thousand in wild dreams, mostly rotten.

BRAMLEY COVE was perhaps two hundred yards across and possessed of the best anchorage on the whole coast thereabout. The beach ran broad and smooth and soft, innocent of stones, to the very water's edge from the foot of the low cliffs that started about one hundred yards inshore from the surf.

On the top of the cliffs, overlooking the cove and reached by a winding trail that clung to the cliff face, stood the low galvanized-iron house with the broad wooden veranda encircling it, that Captain Cush Larson had built for himself to live in during his brief spells ashore.

On the beach lay dark piles of weed and driftwood, with a scattering of cast-up shell-fish. But, more prominent than all just now, the schooner *Day Dream* wallowed half-over on her port side, high and dry, with several natives busily engaged in scraping the accumulation of barnacles and sea-grasses from her hull.

It was evening when the whaleboat brought the captain to his ship's beaching-place, and he stepped ashore with a sigh of thankfulness, pulling a pipe from the side pocket of his white jacket and lighting it with care.

"That'll do, boys," he called lazily to the crew occupied on the *Day Dream's* hull; and with a short yelp of acknowledgment the natives dropped their slices and swarmed up the ropes, hanging from the schooner's rail, to the deck. They disappeared for'ard into the fo'c's'le, and later the smoke began to rise through the still evening air from the stumpy tin stove-pipe that protruded above the galley.

After seeing the whaleboat hauled clear of the backwash, the captain made a slow way up the beach and along the winding path that clung to the cliff face, until he reached his house. A house-boy was already preparing the evening meal, and the clatter of dishes and the clink of cutlery sounded quite homelike to the sailor.

Darkness fell before the meal was concluded and the dishes had been cleared away, and the captain went out on the veranda to smoke and to gaze dreamily over the cove, dimly lit by vagrant shafts of the starlight on the placid waters.

Little was known about Cush Larson on that part of the Australian coast. He had appeared some two years before, bought a small piece of property on the cliffs above Bramley Cove and used the house he had built as a sort of headquarters, going off for long months at a time on mysterious voyages, mysterious because no man knew exactly where he traded.

A series of unfortunate ventures had practically stripped him of his reserve capital and had forced him to go to Red Isaac for supplies on which to feed his crew and keep his ship in repair while he salved the wreck of the *Berwick*. Should the steamer turn out to have gone to pieces

after all, or should his guess about the hiding-place of the pearls prove incorrect, it meant that he would go to the wall completely. Worse, he would lose his ship, for Isaac would be sure to sieze that to pay for the stores, and then the future would mean for the captain a series of jobs working for other men until such time as he had saved enough to buy another vessel.

Larson knew that Red Isaac was crooked. From Sydney to Perth and back there was hardly a marine dealer who was not; but he did not think Red Isaac had the requisite nerve to try any funny business regarding the pearls, especially as the wreck was now legally Larson's property. He had been forced to tell Red Isaac about the whole matter of his secret.

He only hoped that Red Isaac would send the stores early enough to enable him to start the next day. He could warp the *Day Dream* into the sea in a few hours and be bound for the wreck of the *Berwick* in a few more.

The captain arose from his thoughts for a moment and removed his glowing pipe. He listened intently. He thought he could hear the throbbing of a launch engine from a vast distance carrying through the still air. After a while he sank back in his chair, reassured, and went on smoking. It must have been the sea breaking on the rock horns that encircled the tiny cove, he decided.

But ten minutes later he thought he heard a faint cry come from the direction of the beach where the schooner lay. A cry like that of a wandering seabird perhaps. It might even be the native crew quarreling or singing. He could not be sure.

Then a shot rang out with astonishing suddenness, and a spurt of red flame stabbed the darkness below. The captain came to life with a start. He dropped his pipe into his pocket and leaped from his chair.

With half a dozen strides he was at the desk inside the house and hastily loading a small-calibered revolver. Then he went tearing at break-neck speed down the narrow cliff path. The native crew fighting, he thought with an oath.

He wondered where they had managed to get the revolver from. Perhaps they had been rifling his cabin. Then he remembered the beat of the launch engine he thought he had heard, and he was not so sure.

He had just reached the foot of the path and taken a few steps on to the smooth beach, when a tongue of flame shot straight into the air from the slanting decks of the *Day Dream* and gave light for a moment to a vivid picture. The captain saw a gray-painted launch rocking in the shallows, just beyond the surf, a blur of dark figures locked in combat on the schooner's deck, the delicate tracery of masts and rigging against the star-shot sky, which paled before the flame; and then darkness shut down more intense than ever.

There came another shot, then an oath and a cry.

"Beat it!" a voice cried hoarsely—a white man's voice.

As the captain reached the bows of the beached *Day Dream* and started to run for one of the ropes that dangled from the rail, a white-clothed figure slid down with great suddenness, knocking the captain over, and then running like a deer for the waiting launch. The thud of two bodies landing on the beach came to the captain's ears as he struggled to his feet. He saw two natives pick themselves up from the sand and follow in the white man's wake.

Then another tongue of flame, brighter then the first, shot up from the *Day Dream* and remained, growing bigger every moment. The ship appeared to be well alight. The acrid odor of burned petrol drifted to the captain's nostrils. He hesitated a moment between his ship and pursuit. Then he decided in favor of the latter.

He opened fire with his revolver and yelled with satisfaction when he saw the running white man fall heavily to one side, half in the backwash of the sea. The two natives stopped by him and looked up with frightened eyes as Larson drew near.

The captain had thought they were men of his own crew at first, but now saw by the firelight that they were natives of Albany, shiftless, vicious fellows. They hesitated and drew a little toward the anchored launch; but, evidently not caring to desert their leader, and perhaps not understanding the launch's engine, they remained with him until the captain came up. Then they cringed to the sand and covered their heads with their arms, expecting blows, kicks.

ON THE deck of the *Day Dream* chaos reigned. The native crew, somewhat bruised and frightened after an unexpected tussle with three strangers who had appeared as if from the sky, fought the fire that threatened to overwhelm the whole ship. Luckily the vessel was on sand, and they hauled the fine stuff up by bucketfuls and flung it over the burning oil.

But for the fact that one of their number had gone down into the main hold to steal a case of canned salmon, the would-be destroyers of the ship would never have been discovered, so quiet was their boarding. All this, of course, the captain learned afterward.

The white man on the sand turned and snarled, exactly as a wild beast might do when cornered and quite aware of the fact. The captain caught the dull gleam of light on the blue steel of an automatic, and deftly he kicked at the wrist behind it, causing the weapon to fall with a harmless thud.

Then he had the strange man by the throat and was shaking him savagely. The man whimpered with pain, for he was shot in the side; and he half-sobbed out pleas that the captain should leave him alone.

"What the ——'s the meaning of all this!" Larson demanded roughly, and he twisted his captive so that the ruddy firelight fell on his unshaven face and deep-set eyes.

"Why, Jimson!" he cried, astonished.

The two natives wondered whether they should risk a sudden attack on the captain, knock him down and make off with their leader. But they saw that Larson still held his revolver ready, and they decided the time for discretion had come.

"Yes, it's me, Captain Larson," the wounded man whimpered.

The captain shook him again savagely. He knew the man as one of the many beach-combers who bummed for a living around the Albany saloons and waterfront, glad to pick up a few shillings for any task that had not too much work attached to it, and not at all particular as to whether the task required was within or without the law.

"Who put you up to this?" the captain wanted to know.

He knew that the man could have no personal reason for setting fire to the *Day Dream*.

"You won't say I split, captain?" the beach-comber entreated in an agony of fear, wincing the while with pain.

"I'll think about it," was the grim reply. "Come on now, spit it out. I've a good mind to send you up for five years for this."

"Not that, captain, not that! I'll tell you."

The beach-comber's hands clawed the captain's coat.

"It was Red Isaac. He offered me twenty quid to fire the *Day Dream* tonight. I was to report to him when it was done. The ship was to be made so that she could not sail tomorrow."

"So it was Red Isaac, eh? I never thought he had the nerve to buck me. All right, I'll attend to him. Know anything more?"

"I wasn't in the plan, captain. I swear——"

"What do you know? Come on!"

"The *Kaufua* is sailing at dawn, or as soon as I report to Red Isaac that your ship is finished."

"The *Kaufua?* Why, that's that little schooner I saw in the harbor this morning! Who's aboard?"

"There were three partners on her, but one of them quit today. His name was Lann, Clew Lann. The other two's names is Tim Farrell and Bud McGowan. McGowan's boss of the outfit. They're from Sydney way. I don't know where they're bound for, but I know they're in debt to Isaac."

"H'm! Clew Lann? Name seems familiar. What was he aboard?"

"I think he had a share in the ship. He used to act as mate, so they say along the water-front. He does supercargo's work sometimes. I guess they'll pick up a new mate in his place, 'cause Tim Farrell ain't no sailor. They was after Jimmy Duck, but he was up-country on a shooting-trip. I've only got a third mate's ticket in steam or they'd have taken me."

"Good. Do you know if either of those partners know me? No? That gives me an idea.

"Now look here, Jimson, I've got the goods on you and these Kanakas for this evening's work, savvy? The best thing you can do for yourself is to keep your mouth shut about what's going to happen next.

Get that? Good again. Now you're coming with me while I get a few things, and then we'll all go to Albany."

The captain straightened up and hauled his captive to his feet. The man groaned now and then but said nothing. He was caught fair and square, and he knew it. He followed his captor sullenly toward the house, the two Kanakas supporting him.

Larson stopped for a moment by his burning ship and shouted to the Kanaka crew who were still fighting the flames on the deck above—

"Was the trouble very bad?"

They were gradually getting the fire under control, and they shouted to him that they could manage all right. There was no need for him to take charge of operations.

But her running and standing main rigging had been badly burned, and it was very evident to the captain that the *Day Dream* would be useless for some time to come. And if he had any hopes of checkmating Red Isaac and his accomplices, he would have to obtain another vessel from somewhere very quickly. Otherwise things would be easy for Red Isaac. He had only to sail to the wreck and discover the pearls, and could be gone before the captain was able to start from Bramley Cove.

Larson dragged his captive up the cliff path, and when he reached the house gave the house-boy certain curt instructions as what was to be done during his absence. Then, packing a small sea-bag with some haste, he made his way back to the beach and to the launch that still rode in the shallows. He pushed his captive aboard and stepped aboard himself, the two Kanakas, who had remained with him not knowing what else to do, clambering in behind. In a few minutes the launch was clear of the cove and speeding down the coast toward Oyster Harbor, Red Isaac and the schooner *Kaufua*.

RED ISAAC shuffled impatiently up and down the inner room of his store on the other side of the rope barrier. He glanced now and then at the cheap tin alarm-clock that graced the middle of the bare table, and he clicked his tongue impatiently against his cheek. He was very nervous, as was evinced by the twitching of his lips and the way he clawed his flaming beard. The night was well advanced.

There came a quiet knock at the door, and with an exclamation of relief Red Isaac hurried across the store and flung open the little panel that looked out on to the veranda and the street.

"Who is it?"

"Me—Jimson," the beach-comber's voice called; very weak it seemed.

Hastily Red Isaac unbarred the door and flung it back. Then he froze rigid, and a gasp escaped him. The faint light from behind the rope barrier shone on the face of the man who pushed through the doorway and stepped into the store, dragging Jimson by the arm—Captain Cush Larson! He closed the door behind him with a slam.

"I warned you not to try anything, Isaac," he said grimly. "Got anything to say?"

Red Isaac recovered himself and stepped back a pace. He licked his lips.

"Vy, captain, vat is it?"

"Nothing much, except that I don't like your methods. Also I hate having my ship burned."

He strode toward the inner room and motioned Red Isaac to follow. Then he flung the beach-comber from him, sending the man reeling into a far corner, where he remained nursing his wounded side and gazing stupidly on all that transpired.

The captain moved toward Red Isaac, who had followed him like a man fascinated by a strange apparition. He put up his arms with a cry of fear as the captain struck at him. His guard was pitifully weak against the smashing blows that rained on his chest and face. Then Larson caught him under the ear with an iron fist, and Red Isaac went over sidewise and backward with a faint crash, landing on the floor, his flaming beard sticking up at a sharp angle toward the ceiling.

The captain went into the store and dragged back a light coil of line with which he proceeded to bind Red Isaac hand and foot. Then he gagged him with a piece of bunting and proceeded to make Jimson, the beach-comber, secure also. The latter protested whiningly.

"But, captain, I am wounded. And I swear I won't let him go."

"Sorry. Can't take chances," said the captain briefly, and he bound the man as he had intended, though not so tightly and well as he had bound Red Isaac.

"Good-by," he called as he blew out the lamp and left the store.

He chuckled to himself.

Still chuckling, he made his way to the water-front and stepped aboard the waiting launch. He was fairly safe now as far as he knew. Neither of the men aboard the *Kaufua* had ever seen him, and should they chance to recognize him from some remembered description, he was prepared. But he hoped he would not have to take drastic steps. The natives who had been with Jimson could not give the alarm yet a while, for the captain had taken care to land them on the coast some five miles out of town. It would take them all of two hours to walk in across the rough country.

As the launch engine started up again a voice hailed from the darkness shrouding the top of the wharf. Larson loosed his revolver from his hip pocket and looked up.

"Hello!" he called.

A dim figure descended the rickety steps to the water's edge and halted on catching sight of the captain standing in the launch's stern.

"It's Clew Lann, captain," said the newcomer. "You might remember me. You dusted me down in Auckland once. No hard feelings. I came to warn you, that's all.

"I saw through the store window what you did to Isaac. Good work. Only way to treat that breed. You want to be careful of my partners, though. They're ugly men."

The captain hesitated a moment, and then he came a little way up the steps until he stood beside Clew Lann.

"I heard you quit your partners, Lann," he said not without some cordiality.

The other man laughed and stuck his thumbs in his belt.

"Aye, so soon as I heard you were after the pearls I thought it best to quit, I know you."

"That's complimentary. And I suppose the story of the pearls is all over the water-front now? Red Isaac took in your partners so as to double-cross me, I suppose?"

"I guess that was the idea, sure. He told us about Cap'n Mulvaney getting killed in a mutiny or something. And he told us about you and the hiding-place—I suppose the stones belong to you?"

"They belong to me only as far as they are on the *Berwick*. I bought the wreck. But really the stones belong to some unknown party or other. They were poached. They've caused me a whole lot of grief anyway.

"That skunk Isaac just sent Jimson to fire my ship so I couldn't get to the *Berwick* before your precious partners. He well-nigh succeeded, worse luck. Decks badly charred and main rigging damaged, so my Kanakas told me. Did you know anything about it?"

"Not about that, captain," said Clew Lann a little gloomily. "I've done some rotten things in my time, but I never knowingly sank another man's ship, or tried to, so as I could double-cross him. I might tell you my partners won't sail until they hear from Isaac that you're out of the way. I was speaking to them for a bit a while back. They bought me out. I believe Isaac put up the money."

"H'm. Well, thanks for the information, Lann. By the way, what's your partners' names? Do they know me?"

"They only know you by name. Never seen you. The big broad one is Bud McGowan; the thin one is Tim Farrell. I used to sail as mate and had a third share in the ship. What do you aim to do, captain?"

"I'm not sure yet, Lann. But you stick around Albany here until you hear from me again. I may find you a job as mate for me later on. Thanks again for the information. It'll help me. From what I recollect of you from the old New Zealand days you're not a bad sport.

"By the way, tell Isaac when you see him—you might untie him some time tomorrow morning—that the less he says about tonight the better it'll be for him."

"Aye, aye, captain. So-long. And say, the best of luck."

Clew Lann held out his right hand frankly, and, slipping his revolver to the other, the captain shook firmly. Lann was not the sort of man to arouse distrust. Even were he leagued with his partners yet, he could do little harm, for the captain felt that he held all the trump cards in the game so far.

"So-long," he said quietly and dropped back into the rocking boat.

The engine purr grew louder and dissolved into a series of rattling explosions. The trim craft shot away from the foot of the landing-steps. Clew Lann turned with a grunt that might have meant anything.

"I've a good mind to have a shot at the pearls myself," he said. "Seems easy."

He thoughtfully retraced his steps uptown.

BUD McGOWAN leaned over the poop taffrail of the *Kaufua* as the launch chugged alongside and the engine died away in a series of faint gasps.

"Boat ahoy!" he called, not too loud. "Where you from?"

"From Red Isaac," the captain called back unhesitatingly from the darkness that shrouded him.

Tim Farrell, who had been anxiously standing beside his partner, went down to the main deck and dropped a rope's end overboard. A white-clothed figure swarmed up to the deck and faced Tim Farrell, vaguely to be seen in the starlight.

"Who are you?" the thin man inquired curtly, peering into the captain's face. "I don't remember ever having seen you before."

"That's so. I'm Frederick Walters, sir. Red Isaac sent me aboard to act as mate for the coming trip. He said you would need another officer."

"True, true. Any message from Isaac?"

"He said you were to sail right away and not to wait for him. He's got business upcountry tonight. My dunnage is alongside, sir. Shall I hoist it up?"

"But we've got to see Isaac tonight. We don't know where the —— the stuff is," Farrell said impatiently. "What the —— does the red-headed fool want to go shooting off up-country for at this time?"

McGowan came down to the main deck at the sound of the voices and was impatient to know what was happening. He was introduced to "Frederick Walters," the new mate sent aboard by Red Isaac. And when he heard the new mate declare that the instructions were to sail at once he was as perplexed as Farrell.

Captain Larson, who of course was posing as Frederick Walters, did some quick thinking. There was a hitch somewhere. He couldn't have the two partners going ashore to seek Red Isaac by means of the swift launch alongside. Nor could he have them decide to wait till morning to see Red Isaac. He saw an opening very suddenly and cleared his throat as he broke apologetically into the conversation between his new superiors.

"May I ask which one of you happens to be the captain?" he commenced.

"That's me," said McGowan, looking at his new mate quickly.

"Well, Isaac gave me a message for you. He said I was to tell you that the stuff you were to look for was somewhere in the foremast, near the butt. He wasn't quite certain of the exact location. Also he said that a ship called the *Day Dream* wouldn't be able to sail tomorrow. He didn't say what he meant, but I suppose——"

"Yes, yes, Walters; that's quite all right," interrupted McGowan with some eagerness. "We understand what is meant."

"So that's it," muttered Farrell, immensely relieved. "Why didn't you say so at first?" he snarled out in supplement to the mate.

"Sorry, sir," that worthy apologized, and then McGowan laughed.

"All right, Walters, you'll do. Get your dunnage aboard and see your cabin aft is in order. It's got a brass plate over the door with "First Mate" on it.

"But what about the launch? Did Isaac say we were to take it with us?"

"He told me to leave it at anchor in the harbor, sir. He will send a native after it in the morning," the new mate lied glibly.

McGowan nodded, and Farrell muttered a sour—

"I see."

Then, leaving the newcomer to get his small sea-bag aboard and to anchor the launch as per Red Isaac's mythical instructions, the two partners went aft to get ready for sailing. It was still some time till dawn when the *Kaufua* put to sea. The deep clank of the anchor cable came from the rusty steamship, the converted yacht that the captain had seen in the harbor early that day, as the little schooner crossed her bows in the darkness. She was evidently bound down-coast on another trading run.

South and east sailed the *Kaufua*. The captain, as Walters the mate, showed himself thoroughly efficient and adept at handling the ship during his watch, and not once did he make a slip to arouse the suspicions of the partners as to his real identity.

McGowan and Farrell drank a good deal and planned what they would do with their share of the pearls when they had it. They had no intention of returning to Albany to share the treasure with Red Isaac. They

had supposed that he distrusted them as they distrusted him and that he would sail on the *Kaufua* to safeguard his interests.

They supposed that as something had prevented him from coming he had sent Frederick Walters with some sort of instructions to see that the ship returned to Albany after the salving, perhaps even to see that salving was properly carried out. The partners said nothing to the mate however, but decided to wait until he showed his hand, which, were he playing one, he would undoubtedly do when the schooner reached the wreck.

The captain, unaware actually of the light he was regarded in by the partners, yet guessed to a great extent what they were planning. It was unreasonable to suppose that two such men, brought into a deal to double-cross a stranger, would hesitate to double-cross the man who had employed them and then given them apparently every chance to play false.

The captain's own plan of action was not yet formed. Events would form it. His main idea on boarding the schooner was to get to the wreck at least at the same time as those who would despoil her. After that he would find a way out.

The *Kaufua* threaded her way through the Recherche Archipelago and arrived without mishap on the scent of the battered *Berwick*. The wreck had been a small steamship with a red-painted bottom and gray sides. She was piled up nearly vertical on a high reef of coral about a quarter of a mile from the desert-like shores of Mondrain Island, and the blue seas broke over her poop and after well-deck in stately procession.

The single smokestack, colored a salmon pink, was leaning drunkenly to port, supported by only one taut guy and threatening to go by the board every moment. The two stumpy masts were stripped of rigging, but rising as stoutly and as rigidly as ever from the deck.

The bridge, or rather the woodwork of it, had been washed away, and only the bare steel beams and stanchion supports were left. The foredeck was stripped of everything movable—winches, spare anchors, fo'csle hatches and galley. There were great holes in the deck planking itself where the heavy spare anchor for'ard had been washed aft, grooving the woodwork.

Dried salt spotted the ship's hull grotesquely where the spray no longer reached, and the sun had blistered the cheap, dry paintwork to flakes that crumbled at the touch, where the hull reared out of the water. By what miracle the ship retained her peculiar position was not known, though it was probable that some spur of the reef had pierced her bottom and hooked her fast, just as a strong spike might hold a great tree when hung at the proper angle.

The *Kaufua* came alongside the reef without mishap and dropped anchor in about two fathoms of water. The whaleboat was lowered, and the two partners went aboard the wreck, leaving the captain in charge of the schooner. They intended to see first whether they could locate the pearls without their new mate's aid.

On arriving on board the *Berwick* they found great difficulty in keeping their feet on the slanting deck, but with the aid of some of the gear that streamed aft from the foot of the foremast they succeeded in hauling themselves along until they reached the mast itself.

It was the same in its fundamentals as any other ship's mast. The blocks fastened to the shackles in the dead-eyes of the steel table, about eight feet from the deck, hung downward and trailed the heavy derricks falls aft along the deck. It was by these the partners had managed to haul themselves up. The derricks had broken from their gooseneck of steel and reared upward to a height of perhaps fifty feet to the red-painted ball on the truck.

McGowan tapped the butt near the deck with a small hammer he had brought, and it sounded hollow, as all such masts would have sounded. But he found no apparent hiding-place for pearls.

Farrell also made a careful inspection, but his results were equally barren. Then both men looked at each other and frowned. It was possible that the new mate Walters had been informed by Isaac of the exact whereabouts of the pearls, but they hated to have to ask him to find them.

If they could do that themselves they might be able to conceal them and return to Red Isaac with a tale of fruitless search. Of course they could cut the foremast down and thus disclose the hiding-place, but in that event the new mate would know they had the stones.

Tim Farrell had an idea.

"We don't want to give that Walters any chance to tell Isaac anything," he commenced. "Let's you and I cut a hole in the mast. We ought to be able to find a cold-chisel and a maul somewhere aboard. Probably be something left in the lamp-trimmer's room."

"Good idea."

McGowan commenced to crawl up the deck to the fo'csle head, where the smashed-in hatch of the forepeak gaped vacantly to the sky. The partners glanced at the *Kaufua* before they dropped below to seek tools, and they noticed Walters lounging on the poop smoking a pipe and watching them with care. He was smiling contentedly, though the partners could not see that, and he was hoping that they would return to the schooner dispirited and tired by nightfall so that he would have a chance to get aboard the *Berwick* while they slept.

McGowan went down the iron ladder into the forepeak, followed by his partner, and swung aside when he reached the narrow shelter deck. There were only wet sails and ropes there, probably never used, and a few drums of paint. A dull gleam of water came from below, but the orlop deck looked fairly dry.

The two men went on down and, striking a match, found that the iron door leading from orlop to the fo'csle itself was open and fastened back by its iron hook. Passing cautiously through the door, they found the deck storeroom on the right, its wooden door swinging open on rusty hinges. On the bench inside, a clutter of tools showed rusty in the dim light that squeezed through the two shut ports, and on the floor several crowbars, pinch-bars and heavy hammers lay scattered.

It was what they wanted. They stepped inside and made their choice, Farrell picking up a weighty flogging-hammer and McGowan two fairly sharp cold-chisels. They grunted with satisfaction and turned to go back the way they had come.

TWO hours later the captain, on the *Kaufua*, tapped out his third pipeful of hot tobacco and placed the pipe in his pocket. Frowning in a puzzled way, he walked uneasily up and down the length of the poop for several minutes. Then with sudden decision he cupped his hands and sent a hail across the water that divided the schooner from the wrecked *Berwick*.

"Boat ahoy!"

The two Kanakas who had gone in the whaleboat with the partners to the side of the steamer looked up sharply. They had been dozing on the bottom boards, waiting for their masters to appear. The captain waved to them to return to the schooner, and after a few words together they scrambled to the stretchers and dropped the oars into the ro'locks.

They hesitated a moment and glanced up at the slanting decks of the *Berwick*. But not a living thing was in sight. One of them went aboard by means of the boat painter, let the painter go and then dropped back into the boat again.

Making sure that his revolver was in his hip pocket and ready for use, the captain leaned over the rail as the whaleboat drew near the *Kaufua*.

"Where's the skipper?" he asked.

The Kanakas shook their heads. They did not know. They had not seen either of the white men since they had gone for'ard on the *Berwick*.

The captain frowned again and grunted.

"All right. I'll go and see," he said.

He dropped down into the boat and was rowed back to the wrecked steamer. He took the boat's painter aboard with him and made fast and then went for'ard by means of the streaming rigging and falls that lay along the deck.

When he reached the foremast he stopped and looked along the fo'csle head. The hatch of the forepeak still gaped emptily at the sky. There was no sign of the partners.

Puzzled, the captain went back the way he had come and approached the mainmast. The butt was barely three feet out of the water, for the tide was rising, and he

was forced to slide down the deck for the last few steps, as the streaming gear of the foremast ended midships and there was nothing to cling to.

The captain took a long look around. He thought he saw a faint smudge of smoke 'way off behind Mondrain Island, or perhaps on the island itself, but he could not be sure. Of life, other than a few circling gulls, there was still no sign.

Cautiously the captain drew himself alongside the mainmast. He balanced on tiptoe and reached up. He pressed the third rivet-head down on the port side of the mast, just beneath the steel table, and with a faint creaking noise a small panel in the mast dropped back on stiff hinges. It was the secret hiding-place devised by the captain and Mulvaney, his partner, long before.

The captain reached inside the opening and felt around. Then he swore bitterly, for he found nothing. So his whole guess as to the hiding-place of the pearls had been wrong! He had not only had his ship burned for nothing, but he had spent good money on an almost worthless wreck.

Worse, a blow had been given to his confidence in himself. He had been so sure of landing the pearls! He closed the panel with another oath, and so closely did the steel edges fit that there was not the slightest crack to denote that the cylinder of the mast was anything else but sound and whole.

Nothing mattered much now. The captain scrambled back along the deck until he reached the boat. He was about to untie the painter and jump down when it occurred to him that he had seen nothing of the partners.

He let go the painter slack and worked for'ard until he stood over the broken hatch of the forepeak. He hesitated a moment, looked around and then lowered himself down. He reached the orlop deck and found the open door leading to the fo'csle.

Cautiously he went on. He passed by the open door of the deck storeroom with only a glance inside and continued to the alleyway of the fo'csle itself, which ended in a companion that led up to the foredeck. He could see the daylight shining down.

Bending back to keep his feet from sliding on the acute-angled deck and touching the bulkheads on each side to aid him, the captain reached the end of the alleyway without mishap. He was about to step clear of the bulkheads and approach the companionway with the idea of going on deck when, "That'll do, Larson! Keep away from your hip!" broke on his ear.

HE WHIRLED like a flash, lost his footing and went sprawling against the foot of the companionway. But he had seen the man who had spoken.

He was a lean, hollow-cheeked individual with a drooping yellow mustache and bright blue eyes. In height he was perhaps some five feet ten. His shoulders were broad and bony, and bony were his legs and arms.

His clothing was mostly blue serge, a pair of trousers much torn and salt-stained and a pea jacket that had seen better days and from which the arms had been torn. He was naked to the waist under the jacket, and his feet were bare and raw-looking. In his right hand he held a wicked-looking automatic. Recognition was a shock.

"*Mulvaney!*" choked the captain, sitting open-mouthed where he had fallen.

The master of the steamship *Berwick* smiled and bowed a little, but his gun hand did not drop.

"As you say, Larson. But get up and explain the meaning of all this."

"Meaning of what? My God, you're supposed to be dead, Mulvaney! Don't you know you've been reported dead?"

"I imagined they'd do that, of course. But you can't kill me so easy. What are you doing here?"

"Explain yourself first, man."

The captain got to his feet and leaned back on the companion. He was not at all afraid. He knew Mulvaney too well to think he would shoot without just and full cause.

"I had it from your second mate you were dead."

"You heard of the mutiny?"

"Sure."

"Well, they left me for dead in my room and abandoned ship. She was wrecked after that--drifted on to the coast. I came to just as she struck. I've been on board ever since waiting for something to pick me up."

"Why, there was a fisher chap here some time back. He said he came aboard and looked all over for valuables. Took what gear he could manage to get in his boat, too, I believe. Didn't you see him?"

"No. There were a few things missing—a couple of shackle-bolts and a few odds and ends. I guessed somebody had been here, but I never saw them. That was likely one of the days I was ashore on Mondrain looking for fresh water. It's not a long swim. But explain yourself."

"Why, Mulvaney, I'm the owner of the *Berwick* right now."

"The —— you say!"

"Yes. I bought her from the underwriters. They accepted the ship as wellnigh a total loss and paid full insurance."

"Who got it?"

"Your son Jack. The last I saw of him he was as drunk as a lord and bound for Sydney to blow the rest in."

"Swine! I'll trim him when I get hands on him. So the old packet belongs to you, eh?"

"That's it. I heard about the pearls and the fact that the crew couldn't find them. I remembered that panel in the mast we had built 'way back and guessed you'd put the stuff there. I thought it was a cinch for me. Heard the *Berwick* was still above water and that she could be bought cheap. I thought too, there might be some cargo aboard I could salve."

Mulvaney grunted and lowered his gun. He tapped the bandage round his head and smiled grimly.

"I've got a nasty cut here I'd like to have fixed some time. Your two precious pals gave it to me. When they came below I wanted to talk to them about a passage back to Perth, and they jumped me as soon as they heard my name. I had to treat 'em rough. I thought at first they were some of my old crew come back to search the ship again."

"You've got the pearls?"

"You bet I have. No tricks, Larson! I put them where you thought but took them out as soon as I saw your sail heave in sight."

"Well, I don't know but what I couldn't claim them justly now as I own the *Berwick* and all she contains. But that's the fortune of war, I suppose. I can't very well take from you all you've got, and you'll want something when you get to civilized parts. You're lacking a ship, and your son will have about spent all the insurance by the time you get to him. Put your gun away."

"You'd make a good partner again, Larson," said the other, thoughtfully twisting his yellow mustache. "I think some of the cargo the old *Berwick's* got can be salved. I've had all kinds of chances to study the old packet while I've been imprisoned here. Let's go in together once more. You've got a ship of your own, haven't you? And you've got the *Berwick*. I put in the pearls."

"Yes, I've a ship, Mulvaney. The old *Day Dream;* you know her. I'll tell you why I came here in that tub anchored yonder some time. As to going together—why, sure. Shake."

The two men shook very heartily, and then the captain pulled out his papers, showing that what he had said about himself owning the *Berwick* was quite in order. It satisfied Mulvaney, and he slapped his companion on the shoulder with a laugh.

"I know you're square, Larson," he said. "There's not many men I'd trust like you. Come along in the fo'csle."

The two men went into the little three-cornered place used by the sailors of the *Berwick* for a living-room and bedroom and dining-room. It was not very well lighted, as the tightly screwed ports were thick with salt and over some the storm shutters had been dropped. But the light was sufficient to disclose the bound and gagged forms of Tim Farrell and Bud McGowan.

There were several angry lumps about their wrathful faces and bared hands, and it was evident Mulvaney had handled them not at all gently. The captain grinned at them and they glared back at him, understanding now who he was, for they had heard the conversation in the alleyway.

Then the captain sat in one of the after bunks and held himself from falling backward by catching the board of the top bunk with one hand, while he explained to the interested Mulvaney all about Red Isaac and the ship-burning and the deception exercised by Walters, the fictitious mate. And Mulvaney chuckled and remarked that the story was good and that it reminded him of the old days when he and Larson had sailed the islands together.

"Then what shall we do with these birds?" he suggested at the close. The captain looked at the "birds" and chuckled.

"Let them stay here. We shall need the *Kaufua* to take us back to Albany and to get my own ship. We can send some one to pick them up later on before we commence salvage operations."

"Good idea."

Mulvaney laughed and stretched himself.

"Let them have a taste of loneliness and time to think on their would-be crimes. Come on deck. We'll cut them loose later."

The two men went up the nearly horizontal companionway to the foredeck, and there they were brought up short to face an unexpected climax.

A MAN stood watching them, leaning forward to counteract the slant of the deck. He was bald on the top of his head and very sunburned; his eyes were gray and his sparse hair was yellow, a deeper yellow than Mulvaney's. A tattooed anchor could be seen on his ankle when the very light wind whipped his blue dungaree pants. In his hands he held a Winchester rifle of small caliber, but its ugly muzzle covered both men impartially.

"*Clew Lann!*" jerked out the captain.

He had had two surprizes within an hour and wondered whether his heart would stand any more. Mulvaney growled something unintelligible, and the captain whispered aside:

"This is a friend of the men below. I think he's double-crossing them. I know he is me. I thought he was for me. Skunk!"

"Sorry to have to bother you, captain," said Clew Lann pleasantly. "But I thought as every one else was having a stab at the pearls I might just as well. Where's McGowan and Farrell?"

"Below," said the captain wearily. "Tied up and gagged. You're a dirty swine, Lann. Did Isaac put you up to this?"

"I let him go after I left you on the wharf. He pointed out that I could have fifty thousand clear if I attended to the thing myself. Simple, wasn't it? I took the *Nowly*, that coaster lying in Albany, and slipped along. Should have been here before but that we lost one propeller. Might interest you to know Isaac's aboard."

Lann laughed, and his eyes narrowed.

"Come on, cough up the pearls!"

"Go to ——," said Mulvaney.

The captain grunted wrathfully. The pearls were getting to be the center of an interesting situation. No less than six men were now vitally intent on having them.

"Turn round!"

The Winchester muzzle compelled obedience. Sullenly the two victims turned round. Skilfully Clew Lann went through their pockets and found nothing save the captain's revolver and Mulvaney's automatic. He dropped both weapons on the deck. In the inside pocket of the maltreated peajacket Mulvaney wore Clew Lann found the little wash leather bag he sought. He felt the round pebbles inside with his fingers, shook the bag against his ear and, satisfied, began to back off. The captain with a growl started to turn round but Mulvaney whispered tensely, "Let him go!"

And so Clew Lann reached the rail without mishap—the opposite one to which the boat from the *Kaufua* was tied up, and dropped overside to the waiting launch. The engine started with a roar, and the launch shot away, bound for the other side of Mondrain Island, where the converted yacht, now a rusty coaster, lay. It was her smoke the captain had seen when he went to open the steel panel in the mainmast.

Five minutes later, with the launch rapidly fading in the distance, the two men on the *Berwick's* deck ventured to turn round. Lann had kept them covered and called warnings so long as he was able, but now he was out of earshot, well-nigh out of rifle-shot.

"The ——!" swore the captain. "How was it we didn't hear the engine of that —— thing approach?"

"Probably sculled the last few hundred yards," Mulvaney said dryly.

He stooped and picked up his automatic and held it in the palm of his hand. Cautiously he slipped out the magazine.

"And the pearls are gone. We could never catch that —— steamer with——"

Larson stopped short and whistled as he saw what Mulvaney was doing.

"So that's it, eh?"

A cascade of softly luminous pearls, varying in size from a pea to a small hazel-nut, poured from the butt of the automatic. The weapon had never been loaded.

"The bag your friend got contained only seed pearls and a few blisters and some baroques. When I saw your ship heave in sight I took the precaution of hiding the really valuable pearls. Those I've lost are worth perhaps a couple of hundred quid, not more; but these! Only an expert could tell. Fifty thousand at the least."

"I heard you cleaned up a hundred thousand."

"Exaggeration. Of course, these might value to that. I'm a bad judge."

"Well, let's cut our prisoners loose and get away," the captain said finally.

Mulvaney assented and poured the pearls back into the butt of his automatic.

"I'm sick for some fresh meat and a bath, and I'm sick for a good drink," he said mournfully. The captain laughed.

"I'll see what I can do for you in Albany," he said.

Then the two of them went below, cut the bonds of the two partners in the fo'csle, and returned to the *Kaufua*. The little schooner heaved up her anchor and was under way within an hour, while two profane men shook their fists at her from the foredeck of the wrecked *Berwick*. They would be marooned until such time as the *Kaufua* returned with some man of the captain's choosing to pick them up.

On the other side of Mondrain Island, steaming hastily for Adelaide, the converted steam yacht *Nowly* rang with greater profanity than that uttered by McGowan and Farrell. For Red Isaac was cursing Clew Lann in the choicest Hebrew and *bêche-de-mer* English, while both gazed with popping eyes at the little pile of seed pearls, blisters and baroques on the saloon table before which they stood.

A HAPPY BIRTHDAY

A Complete Novelette by Leonard H. Nason

Author of "The Patrol," "A Can of Jam," etc.

TWO o'clock on a mid-Summer's afternoon. A gentle breeze rippled the fields of standing grain, and rustled the leaves overhead. The sky was a beautiful deep blue, and cloudless. Broad, rolling wheat-fields with groves of trees rising like green islands. Let us peer into one of these groves and see what lurks therein.

There was a little causeway that ran through the largest of the groves, and then on to the Route National and so southward to Viffort and Verdelot. Where the causeway began at the edge of the trees was a seventy-five, covered with a green netting. Under the gun were silent forms, lying motionless. These were gunners.

Out in the wheat were other quiet men—the telephone detail, who had gone out to inspect the wire. They heeded not the sun's rays, not they. Farther along the little path was a grass hut. From the doorway protruded two booted feet, garnished with spurs. An officer.

The sun came down here in broken patches, and there was a slight chill from the little swamp that lay off in the woods, a chill that sank to the heart. The silence was uncanny. Had these men been cut down in the flower of their youth, had they been laid as helpless sacrifices on the bloody altar of war? Huh! From the recumbent gunners to the telephone detail gold-bricking in the wheat, they were all asleep. They

were being heavily disciplined with bunk fatigue. With groans and curses they stopped sleeping to eat, and with curses and groans they pushed aside their empty mess-kits and fell back upon their blankets again. A hard, hard life, and a bloody war.

And do not think, indulgent reader, that this was a side-show, or a training sector. If you should climb that tree, yes, that big oak with the red arrow and the letters P. C. on it, you could see, to the west a little south, a smudge on the horizon. That was Paris. To the north, not more than two miles, were the German lines. Between the two was this battery of field artillery.

These men had been at the front but a little while. Each night they chalked mysterious figures on the gun-shields, spun wheels, and fired a number of rounds of H. E., and sometimes gas, into the patient night. In a day or so this lost its glamour. There never was any reply.

After the heart-breaking labor of the training camp, the standing to heel, the spit and polish, O'Grady and the Limey shuffle, a life of ease was doubly welcome. And then the life of ease palled. There had been some fights, and the old man had cut down on the meat. He had also stated that any enlisted man of the armies of the United States that opened his mouth by way of growl would be sent back to the *echelon*, where there were a hundred and fifty horses to groom, and where the men took to the dugouts whenever the lieutenant-colonel appeared.

Yet there were some in that grove that were awake. On the side of the causeway, away from Germany and toward Paris, was a pit, with four men digging in it and one sitting at the top, smoking and swinging his legs. The four that digged were machine gunners, and for two months they had drilled with machine guns, taken them apart and put them together, learned the name, weight, age and civil state of each and every one of the parts, who invented it and when; they had gone to the range and shot themselves black in the face with every make of machine gun known to civilized man. Now they were at the front and could make their knowledge useful, they were digging a telephone dugout, and each man had a shovel. They had not seen a machine gun since they left Coetquidan where they had trained.

"Ham" was the corporal's name, and with him labored the "Frog," a man named Fisher, who was foredoomed to be known as "Bud," and one known as "Hat" Smith, who upon being asked his name in order to draw his uniform at the recruit depot, had looked in his hat, that he might refresh his memory, and make no mistake by giving the wrong one. He that swung his legs was sergeant Eadie, of whom we shall know more.

"Hey, sergeant," said Ham. "What do you think about this place? I claim this is a dead sector. Here we been here almost two weeks, and I ain't heard a shell explode, nor seen any Boche planes, nor done anything but sleep and eat. The old man won't even let me set up the machine guns. Says they'll get rusty."

"Don't get hermantile," said the Frog. "We ain't got nothin' to crab about now. This is too good to last. I'm tellin' you they'll be havin' us playin' O'Grady around these fields yet. This gettin' up when you want to and goin' to bed the same way, and not salutin' officers, and standin' no formations but mess, ain't my idea of discipline. In all my service——"

There was a chorus of jeers at this.

"Button your mouth," said Ham, "and give your ears a chance. I asked the sergeant a question."

The sergeant sat down and rolled a cigaret. This man was an observer. He played with maps and goniometers, and went up to the front lines at night. He knew the names of all the farmhouses in sight—every clump of trees and every farm building in France has a name—he could tell where all the roads went and where they came from. Consequently his opinion was valuable.

"Well," he said, "the frogs claim that Jerry is due to pay us a call any night. Any man's guess is a good one. However, two new batteries came in last night. Now in this piece of woods that we are in is the first battalion of our own outfit. There are also two battalions of our own doughboys back of the kitchen. They're resting for forty-eight hours. Over across the road is a battery of frog motor artillery and in back of them are some six-inch howitzers. From here down clear to Monthuriel are seventy-fives, pretty nearly hub to hub, so I guess they really expect an attack. It can't come any too quick for me. I crave to see some war."

"Well, I ain't crazy about havin' a war,"

said Ham, "but I wish the old man would lay off the machine gun detail for all the dirty work. Yesterday we was all day digging a kitchen pit to throw garbage in. Then we lugged bedding rolls for the officers. Before that we built the old man a house. Two of my men got detailed as runners, and one of 'em is doing K. P. permanent. Do you know where the guns are? Ten feet deep under the spare harness and pistol ammunition in the slat wagon!"

"Well, somebody has to do the work, and there isn't any one else available."

"Huh! Looka the gunners. Sleep all day by them guns. What's that for? Spoil their aim if they do any work, I suppose. Telephone men, gold-brickin' around between here and the regimental P. C. lookin' for breaks in the wires with their eyes shut. An' you observers, too. I mind the time the machine gunners went up to dig you an O. P. You couldn't even dig yourselfs a hole to get into when it rained. You and 'Shorty' stretched out under a tree and slept all night."

"Well, Ham, you know we might have had an attack that night, and then Shorty and I would have had to stand up and peer earnestly through our field-glasses, while you and your gang could have stayed safely in the hole."

"Aw, what did you enlist for, if you didn't want to work?" asked the Frog.

"To get three squares and a flop the same as you," said Ham. "I ain't got nothin' against them Huns. I'd just as soon fight the limeies or the frogs. Especially the frogs. Them birds that soaked us a franc apiece for eggs, and a dollar for a bottle of red ink worth ten cents! I come into this army to go to war and kill somebody, an' all I've done for over a year is dig holes and march around learnin' a lot of stuff I had to forget the next month. Here I am a corporal, an' I have to get down in this hole an' swing a pick because I got a lot of bums with me that wouldn't make a louse on a good soldier's neck."

Now, during this discussion, Ham leaned on his pick, and his men, of course, forebore to shovel while their superior rested. It was plain that the more conversation there was the less work would have to be done.

Thus Bud Fisher:

"Me, I yearn for to get to grips with them Germans. They musta done somethin' raw or we wouldn't 'a' declared war on 'em. Lead me to 'em says I."

"We went to war," said the soldier named Smith, "to git rid of all the bums in the country. They shipped 'em over to France to get 'em killed off."

"Is that so!" said Fisher, who felt a personal meaning in Smith's remark. "Well you musta been one o' the first they got."

"Shut up now," said Ham, "no fightin' here. The only good either one of yuh would be is to stop a bullet that was meant for a better man."

Here the mail orderly came, calling loudly down the causeway.

"Sergeant Eadie, oh, Sergeant Eadie," he chanted.

"Here!" cried the sergeant.

"Package for the sergeant," said the mail orderly, holding out a large wooden box, which he was carrying in both hands.

He licked his lips suggestively.

"Hot dog," said the sergeant, "if I hadn't forgotten that tomorrow was my birthday! And this is from my aunt who lives in Bordeaux. Good for my French relations. Hand me that pick."

"Don't open it here," said the Frog, "or every son-of-a-gun and his brother will be around like flies."

"Save it till tonight," said Ham, "and then we'll have a real stampede. Don't even open it yet."

"Jake!" said Sergeant Eadie, and he went up the road to his solitary dugout.

This was not really a dugout. He had dug the ground out in a rectangle, about three feet wide, and six feet long. It was scarcely two feet deep. The sides were built of ammunition boxes filled with earth, and a shelter tent over the top made it waterproof. It was covered with branches for camouflage—at that time everything had to be camouflaged—and it probably would not show on an airplane photo any plainer than the nose on a man's face. Anything that is raised above the earth will show a shadow, and no man has yet devised a means to hide shadows. Camouflage was not invented by the French. An ostrich with his head in the sand was the inventor.

Eadie's dugout had no head cover, but that made little difference. A man was safe in a shallow hole against anything but a direct hit, and if a direct hit got him, he would never know it. And no matter how deep the dugout, Jerry had something that

would go down and get you in it, so why waste labor digging dugouts?

The sergeant crawled in with his box, and placed it carefully at the head of his blankets. He had four saddle-blankets for covering, for though the month was July, the nights were bitter cold.

"I suppose," thought he, "that I ought to invite the aspirant and one or two others from the frog motor outfit. They've given me a lot of liquor."

Eadie's mother, by the way, was French, and he could speak the language as readily as he could English. This was a great asset, it enabled the officers of his battery to avail themselves of a great deal of help from the French officers, and Eadie could go to the French *cuistot*, which is soldier slang for cook, and swap cans of tomatoes and beans, for cheese and sausage and other delicacies. The sergeant also had many a meal himself from the French N. C. O.'s mess, and many a skinful of good wine.

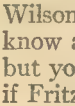
And now that I am on the subject, I might as well get the reader thoroughly acquainted with Sergeant Eadie, for he is to be the hero, or rather the principal actor in the tale. He had enlisted in the wild fervor of the early days of the War, with the idea that because he took on in the regulars, he would go to France at once. That he didn't was his first shock. He received another when the first sergeant swore at him. His was a proud spirit, and he at once told the top that he would stand for no such language.

"Lie down to it then, for the Jawn you are," said Mulcahey, and stretched him with a clip on the ear.

Now, Eadie was a good clean American lad, albeit green to the Army. He sought out a recruit like himself, who had been a pork and beans fighter before his army career began. For a price the fighter took Eadie in hand, and the two spent all their spare time together, while Eadie learned the mysteries of the noble art. He nursed his wrath against the top until his teacher declared him proficient, and then whispered in the top's ear that he would like to see him back of the corral. It was a noble fight, and it waged for the better part of five minutes. After Eadie had been revived in the horse-trough, the top slapped him on the back.

"'Tis a fine lad ye are, my buck," said he; "there's few men can stand up to me for five minutes. 'Tis always the happy man I am to oblige, more by token if the young man is but newly arrived in the outfit."

After that Eadie kept his tongue between his teeth, and did as he was bid, so that by degrees he became a noncom., and then an observer. And now a strange thing. Some men have their pet vices and others their cherished virtues. Hard two-fisted men there are who do not smoke. There are others who do not drink. And some few there are who do not swear. Eadie was one of these last. Drink he did, and fight with the M. P.s like any other man, but he was never profane. The highest provocation brought nothing from him stronger than "darn." This was the more remarkable in a mounted outfit. Enough for that. This sergeant was just a normal young man of twenty-two, who had no idea of war except that it was very exciting to go to, and with no more idea of battle than one gets from the moving picture and the book of fiction. There were a lot like him in the A. E. F.



IN THE late afternoon, the captain summoned Eadie to the grass shelter that served as the post of command.

"Sergeant," said he, "McLure is sick, and Wilson comes off duty at five. I don't know any one else I dare send to the O. P. but you. I know it's out of your turn, but if Fritz comes over tonight, I don't want a green man adjusting fire for me. Report to the battalion P. C. at four."

"Ham," said the sergeant, jumping off the causeway into the pit where Ham and his gunners still labored, "the party will have to be postponed until tomorrow night. I've got to go up to the O. P. because McLure is sick. Let's go take a look at him."

McLure and Wilson, the two other observers, had pitched their tents together in a clump of trees on the side of the causeway farthest from the enemy.

"How's tricks, Mac?" asked Ham, lifting a corner of the tent.

"I feel like ——," said Mac, "and I don't know what's the matter with me."

"Did you have the doctor yet?" asked Eadie.

"Yes, but all he did was look wise and slip me a couple of pills."

"Can we get you anything?"

"No, thanks. Wilson will be back in a little while, and he can fix me up, I guess."

"I'll tell you," said the sergeant, "when I come back, we'll have a bottle of champagne that I know is in a box I got for my birthday, and that will fix you up as well as you ever were."

Some time later the observation detail passed through the battery position on their way up to the front. It was late afternoon, a time of day that always seems more peaceful than any other. There was a pleasant smell of trees, and of wood smoke, and savory slum, and boiling coffee. The men of the battery who did not have to stay at the guns were beginning to gather for supper, rattling their mess-kits as they came along.

"Sherman ought to have seen this outfit," thought Eadie.

There were three batteries in a battalion, and each battery sent one man to the observation post. One of the battalion officers went along to oversee the job. These men stood a two hour relief each, all night, on the lookout for rockets. During the day they slept, or watched the German lines through their field-glasses. For all they could see of enemy activity, they might just as well have looked at the moon.

The detail went up the road to the front lines, carrying their blankets on their arms, and talking together about various matters. It was broad daylight, of course, but that meant nothing to them. The road was in plain sight from the German side of the river, but they should worry, there weren't any Germans there, anyway.

"If there were," said Eadie, "they would have shot us up before now."

"I don't think there are very many there," said the lieutenant. "There probably won't be any action around here until Fall; perhaps not then. The next drive will be for the channel ports. But then, nobody knows. You can't believe the official reports, much less the newspapers."

"I'll say," said Eadie, "I don't believe the enemy is as bad as people try to make out. I've been filled up so often by a lot of bunk about what savages the Germans are, and all that stuff. I think the stories about Belgium are a lot of hop. And if they aren't, what nation can throw the first stone? Not England. She burned Washington once, for no reason at all. And Sherman's march to the sea puts anything von Kluck ever did in the deepest shade, to say nothing of the way the North treated the South after the Civil War. And I was born in Massachusetts, too, so my opinions are my own, and not my ancestors'."

"I'd be careful who I talked to like that," said the lieutenant. "Some one may be getting you into a jam. I guess I've heard of you before. Aren't you the man that doesn't swear?" Eadie blushed.

"I think that swearing is a sign of a weak mind and a poor vocabulary," said he.

The looey laughed, and said no more.

"We'll have to stop at La Rocque," said the lieutenant, "to get a guide and our passes. The battalion has a new observation post, and I don't know where it is."

The detail waited outside the gate while the officer went in. The road to Fossoy made a slight bend here, and was visible from the German lines for a few feet. The soldiers peered through the screen of leaves that had been raised there, at the hills back of the German lines. They were dark-green in places, and as colorful in others as a French officer's uniform. Yellows, reds and shades of browns.

"That looks more like stage scenery than anything else I ever saw," said one of them.

"I guess," said another, "that Fritz didn't do a whole lot of battlin' around here. I bet they's fish in that creek."

"That's no creek," said Eadie, "that's the Marne River."

"Well, they're sure hard up for water if they calls that a river. That ain't nothin' but a little ole brook."

The lieutenant appeared with another officer, a tall, thin man, with a sad face.

"Come this way," he said, "and I'll get the intelligence officer to show you where your O. P. is."

He led them through the courtyard, and out a little gate into the orchard at the back, where he turned them over to another man, who led them forward in silence. As they were passing through a little grove, this new officer halted the detail.

"This is our reserve trench," he said in an impressive whisper. "We have a machine gun company in here."

The observing detail looked around them earnestly, but saw nothing. They went on.

"Those are French observers," said the officer again, still in that same husky murmur.

"Do you know what outfit they're from?" asked the artillery lieutenant, in the other's ear.

"No," was the noiseless reply.

The detail was becoming excited. All this whispering was getting on their nerves. They must be very close to the front lines.

"I wonder if we can bum a drink from those frogs," said one in his normal voice.

"Shut up!" yelled every one, at the top of their voices—that is, whispering voices. "Do you want to get us all killed?" asked Eadie. "Talking out loud like that, right here within a few feet of some rough Germans?"

This incident was trying to the temper. To him that believes it not, let him try bawling some one out, without raising his voice to the point where it is audible at a distance of three feet.

Finally the guide pointed to a clump of young trees.

"Is that it?" asked the artillery officer.

The other nodded silently. They crept forward on tiptoe. The men who had been there since the night before came out, putting on their packs. They were in a rush to get back and have their supper.

"Well! Well!" cried their officer heartily. "You took long enough getting here!"

The men of the new relief gasped.

"Hi, Eadie," called Wilson from among the trees. "How's McLure?"

"Why all the racket?" asked the lieutenant of the new relief. "Do you want all the Dutch in the sector to know we are here?"

"No fear," said the other, "the nearest enemy is over a mile away across the river."

"Then what the —— were you whispering for all the way down here?" demanded Eadie's lieutenant of the infantryman.

"I can't help it," said this one huskily; "I've got a cold."

The observation post was on the slope of a hill that slowly ran down to the wheatfields on the river-bank. There was a fine view both up and down the river, and a good one up a little gorge that ran back into the hills on the opposite side. Back of the O. P. at the top of the hill was La Rocque Farm, where the infantry had their headquarters. The O. P. itself was a little circle of cut branches, with roof of boughs to foil observation from the air. There was a shallow dugout at the rear where the men who were off duty could sleep.

Here, then, was the end of the three thousand mile journey.

It was rather a shock to think that here was France and over there was Germany. Up-river was the town of Chartrèves; directly across was Gland, to the west Brasles, and then Château Thierry itself. The towns had not been shelled to any great extent, and the only ruins visible were the bridge at Mezy and a church at Chartrèves.

How different from the common idea of a battlefield! A peaceful valley. The little river, hardly more than a creek, sparkling in the rays of the setting sun. White roads, villas, hotels, and there to the west, in the shadow of Hill 210, lay a great city, with innumerable churches, a city hall, barracks and great buildings, all deserted and silent.

On the American side of the river was a railroad, with a signal bridge and station at Blesmes. The waving wheat, and the dark green of the Forest of Barbillon on the other bank. There was a lonely deserted look about those houses that made Eadie think of a cemetery. Those white cottages had the air of tombs.

Eadie looked over his map, while the light lasted, and checked his targets and concentration points with his compass. There was a cross-roads where the road through the Forest of Barbillon met the river-road. It was designated by two numbers, called coordinates. To get fire on that cross-roads, all Eadie had to do was to speak those numbers into the telephone, and ask for a certain number of rounds. If the shells went wide of the mark, he had to make the corrections in the range and elevation necessary to place the bursts properly.

There was a yellow house there, with a fountain in front. That was another target. There was a stone wall that was supposed to have machine guns behind it, and a path that went over the hill back of Mont St. Père. Then there was an area known as normal barrage, that was just a section of landscape. When the infantry threw up a rocket for artillery fire, the battery cut loose on "normal barrage" and removed it skyward, together with all its occupants, be they German or American.

All these the sergeant looked at through his glasses, and then folded up the map. He took off his pistol belt and hung it on a tree, likewise unrolled his blankets and tossed them down into the dugout. This was folly, but as I have said, the sergeant had not been long upon the front.

It grew darker and began to rain. A

wandering Frenchman appeared, without tin hat or gas-mask. The frogs rarely wore them, for that matter, unless fighting was actually going on.

"Cigaret?" said he, smilingly, meaning that he would like one, not that he had one to offer.

"*Macache*," said the observer, and grinned to see the startled look that the Frenchman gave him. "*Macache*" is French soldier slang for "Nix."

They conversed.

"Do you think the Germans will ever try to cross?"

"Never," said the frog; "the cows. They don't like the seventy-fives well enough to come over to pay them a call. We stopped them on the Marne in 1914, and will do it again."

The observer regarded the valley through the falling mist. Surely no troops would ever try to cross that stretch of field and river. Later—but wait. There was a clatter of machine gun fire, and a Very light soared up and then floated gently downward. The American side of the bank burst into a roar. And what were those machine gunners shooting at? They should worry. The guns made a great noise, anyway. A shell from the American guns moaned overhead and burst in Gland with a distant clang. The sector was waking up.

Eadie remembered the night the battery had hiked up from Sablonniers, their first night on the front. From the summit of the last hill, he had looked back. It looked like the lights of a great city, twinkling for miles, only each light was a gun. Did the Germans have enough artillery to silence or neutralize that enormous gathering of guns? Were there as many guns in all the world? He who seeks to know, let him read on. The farther bank of the Marne remained silent. Though the Americans machine-gunned the wheat into chaff, though they shelled the roads into scars on the landscape, and drenched the remains with gas, there were no signs of life.

At nine o'clock the lieutenant and another observer came back from consorting with the infantry by the railroad track.

"Turn in, sergeant," said he, "we'll let you sleep till three o'clock."

The third man was already in the little dugout. The sergeant crawled over him, and noticed that he had undressed to his underwear, and had taken off his gas-mask. Now, the sergeant knew that this was wrong, for all he was no old-timer, but he said nothing, for it is a saying in the Army that every one should groom his own horse and then there will be fewer kicks.

THE sergeant lay for a while, trying to compose his gas-mask and tin hat so that they would be a little more comfortable, then drifted calmly off to sleep. Suddenly he was wide awake. He smelt a bit of chlorine. Then far, far off he heard the raucous sound of a Strombos horn. The other man in the dugout awoke and began to crawl around in the darkness.

"I can't find my mask," he moaned.

The sergeant climbed into his own, and the two men began to paw over the blankets, overcoats and slickers in a wild effort to locate the missing mask. There was a long rolling peal of thunder, that rumbled and rumbled along the hills. The other soldier began to make gasping sounds, and then retched violently. The observer tried to drag him up the dugout steps.

"Why, there's just as much gas out there as in here," he thought.

The thunder continued. Thunder? That was the sound of guns. The body of the other man grew limp. He had died in the sergeant's arms.

Outside the dugout, the rain was still falling. Along the crest of the hills across the Marne the flashes of the German guns played like heat lightning.

"Gee," thought Eadie, "they've started something at last." Come what might now, he had been in battle. Now, to show how much of a soldier he was. He started toward the O.P., and nearly fell headlong into a great hole, from which a thin spiral of smoke ascended. He remembered hearing a sound as of a thousand tin pans hurled down a back stairway, while he and the other man were hunting for the mask. So they'd blown up the O.P.

Back of him, on the hill-top, was a continuous crashing and banging. He could see great bursts of flame. There were no shells falling about him, but the air shook from the continuous concussion of the bombardment, and from the disturbance caused by the many projectiles rushing through space. The sergeant was shaking like a leaf from the excitement. There was something so grand and awful in this tremendous clamor. Here indeed was battle and he a part of it.

He decided to try to get back to La Rocque Farm. There would be officers there to tell him what to do. Surely he could do no good here on this hillside, without glasses, instruments and unarmed. He remembered that there was a road leading down from the farm, bordered with great trees and if he could but reach this road, he would have no trouble in finding the house. So off he started up the hill.

There was a rushing sound as of a train at high speed. Instinctively he threw himself flat on the ground. The shell burst with a tremendous clang! Stones and bits of earth fell on him. Hot dog! That was a near one. He leaped and began to run. A slow trot at first, and then faster and faster. Panic grew on him. His breath came in great sobs, for he could not get enough air through the valve in his mask.

The sound of an approaching shell was new to him when he started, but before he had gone very far up that hill, he had heard enough of them never to get the sound from his mind the rest of his life. What times he did not fall headlong over stones, he cast himself to earth when that rushing shriek broke upon his ears. He conceived the idea that these Germans, across the river and several miles back in the hills, could see him on that ink-black slope, and were deliberately trying to get him. When the agony of his gas mask became unendurable, he took it off.

"I'd rather get gassed than smother to death in that thing," said he.

At last the road! It stretched through the darkness, clearly defined by giant oaks. Here he slowed to a walk, and tried to catch his breath. Strangely enough he felt safe. There was a gate at the end of the road, and he shinnied cautiously over it. A shell burst near by with a sudden crump. And then he noticed that he heard no sound from the American guns. All this fearful roaring and banging was from the Germans. His mind did not dwell on this thought.

La Rocque Farm. A great dark pile of a building, its doors barricaded with sandbags. The observer went to one and shouted. No answer. He walked all around the house, but saw no sign of any one. It was well for his peace of mind that it was dark. There was that in that silent courtyard which would have unhorsed his reason. Were they still asleep?

And then he saw what appeared to be an entrance to a tunnel. Down it he went, and there was the whole works. The sudden light made him blink. Candles innumerable and lanterns. He was in the great cellar of the house. A platoon of infantry was drawn up, ready to rush out into that storm of steel. Their officer was madly polishing the pieces of his gas-mask. They went out, the men looking like children suddenly awakened in a strange room, and the cellar was almost empty.

The colonel sat at a table, bareheaded, calm and fully dressed. He had on the lining of his trench coat, for it was bitter cold in that cellar. A French officer was striding up and down.

"Do this," cried he, "and that; you must send this battalion here, and that one somewhere else; why do you not listen to me? The Boche are here." He lapsed into French and rent his hair.

The colonel contemplated him.

"Major Pinard," said he, "or whatever your name is, I am responsible for this regiment only to God and the commanding officer of this division. I will take orders from no one else. Now," said he, turning to a man writing madly on a typewriter, "go on from there. 'I am confident not a single Boche will cross the river.' "

Then the observer stepped up to him.

"Sir," said he, "I am from the Blankth Field Artillery. My observation post has been destroyed, and I have come here to report."

"Could you see anything of the enemy?" asked the colonel.

"No, sir."

"Well, you will before long. Find the artillery officer and report to him. He may have some orders for you if he isn't too scared to speak."

Eadie turned to go out just as an officer came in breathlessly.

"Sir," he panted, "I can't find a runner anywhere."

"So!" said the colonel. "Well, there'll be plenty around here when it comes daylight. Here you, artilleryman, tell your officer to report to me when you find him. We might as well make these men useful for once. God knows our artillery gives us little enough support. I shouldn't wonder if they were waiting for permission from the brigade commander to open fire."

Now, the colonel's peeve was due to the fact that the artillery were not allowed to

do any shooting on their own hook, except by direct permission of the brigadier. Upon a day this same colonel had asked for a barrage, he wishing to make a little raid on some machine-gun posts. While the group commander was telephoning the brigade for permission, and the brigade adjutant was waking the brigadier up and getting a bootjack thrown at him for his pains, the colonel got tired of waiting, and threw his men across the river without any artillery support. The guns, meanwhile, having received permission to fire, laid down a beautiful barrage, right in the middle of the field in which the doughty colonel's troops were lying. Thus the day was utterly spoiled for the infantry.

As Eadie was going out of the cellar, he saw a man in the peculiar olive-drab uniform that the French interpreters wore. This man had the cheerful countenance of one about to be hanged.

"Cheer up," said the sergeant; "why all the heavy gloom? This is only a little shell-fire."

The Frenchman looked at him soberly.

"My boy," said he, in his careful English, "I have not heard him for four years without knowing what she means. Listen!"

The artilleryman gave ear. There was a subdued rushing sound all about them, and a slight trembling, like a house by the side of a railroad, when a train goes by. "This is a real bombardment, this one; it is worse than Verdun."

"How long will it last?" asked Eadie.

"Till we are all dead."

The cellar was not all one great room, as the observer had at first supposed. He went down a narrow passage from which opened rooms smaller than the one in which he had seen the colonel. There were some wounded in one. In another was a crowd of men, sitting silently looking at the floor. They were sergeants-major, clerks, signal-corps men, wireless operators, dog-robbers, and all the rest of the long-haired crowd in tailor-made uniforms that hang about a regimental headquarters.

An officer was pleading with them, asking them if any one knew the way to Major Sullivan's P.C. They did not. They denied ever having heard of such a place. If the officer talked long enough they would deny being in the American Army. Very supercilious some of them are to a poor, unshaven doughboy, and inclined to go a bit large, because they bear orders from the colonel to the officers.

The passage went all the way under the house, and came out on the other side. Here was another sand-bagged entrance. The reek of gas was heavier on this side of the house, and the sound of the bursting shells much louder. Some one rushed down the stairs and nearly knocked Eadie down.

"Why, sergeant!" this one cried, peering at him in the dim candle-light. "I was just looking for you. The colonel wants to send some one back to the artillery to be sure that they are directing their fire on the right places."

Poor Eadie saw with a sinking heart the lieutenant who had gone up to the observation post with him that evening. He experienced a strange chill in his feet.

The two men sneaked up the stair and ducked around a corner of the building. It was pit-dark in the courtyard, but there was a group of men in one corner. An officer hurried up to the two.

"Is this the man?" said he.

"This is the one," said Eadie's lieutenant.

"Well, hurry and start him off. Do you know your way back all right?" he asked the sergeant.

"Yes, sir," said Eadie through hammering teeth.

"Take off your blouse," said the artillery officer, "and if you don't ever see it again, you'll know that some Hun got it."

There was a terrific crash from the other side of the house, and the clink, clink, of falling tile, then the slow sliding shush-sh of brick tumbling into the yard.

"Getting warm," said the infantry officer.

Eadie shook like a leaf.

"Now listen," said the artillery lieutenant; "tell the major to continue the barrage on Gland Right and Gland Left, and to keep it going for all he's worth. That's all you need to say." Gland Right and Left were barrage areas across the river, where Fritz might be massing his troops. "Now, go ahead, and good luck."

Just then a man ran up.

"If you're the guy that's going back to the artillery, I can give you a lift in my ambulance. I'm goin' out to Courboin."

"What's that?" cried the officer. "An ambulance? Never mind, sergeant, I'll go."

He ran across the yard, leaped on to the running-board, the motor roared and they were gone down the road. Eadie put on his

blouse again, and descended once more into the cellar.

The wounded filled all the passageway by now, so that the only place where there was any room was just at the foot of the stairs. There was an ambulance driver sitting there with a wounded arm. Another man was lying on a stretcher, and the rest were unhurt. They sat around on the cold stone floor and blinked at each other. There was only one candle going, so that it was rather dim, but they felt that they were safe for a while anyway.

"We're all right till we begin to hear machine-gun and rifle fire. That means our guys are retreatin', and about then I'm goin' to set sail," said a man, whose worn breeches showed his dirty underwear through the holes in the knees.

"This is one o' the times," said another, "that I'm glad I ain't no officer. If I want to get down in a hole and stay there, no one gives a ——, and the same way if I get up and run. But these here officer guys, they gotta let on they don't mind a bit, and they gotta stay on the job till they get bumped off."

After that there was silence. Each one was straining his ears for the rattle of machine-gun fire.

A voice roared down the passage.

"Any artillerymen in here?"

"Here's one," called Eadie.

He had better kept still, but he was not wise in the ways of war.

"Come up here, the colonel wants to see you."

The sergeant picked his way over the bodies of the men that lay in the passageway. The chill of the coming dawn was in the air, and it was cold in that cellar with the coldness of a polar night. And it was damp. The water hung on the walls in great drops. There were no candles in that passage, but a sort of subdued light came through it from the rooms at either end. The wounded lay there silently, and only by their eyes could you tell if they lived. And by the eyes of some, a doctor could have told that they were dead.

There were many of them whose lives might have been saved, or who might not have lost a limb, had they been able to get out. But that is one of the horrors of war. No ambulance can move on a road, nor can any other living thing, while a bombardment is going on, and so these men must lie there patiently on that cold floor, until Death touches them, or the bombardment stops, and the ambulances can run once more.

The colonel was still sitting calmly by the table.

"Sergeant," said he, "you find that lieutenant of mine, my intelligence officer, and the two of you go out and see what you can see. I want to know if the attack has begun. I want to know where the enemy is crossing, and how the regiments on my right and left are holding out. You be sure to note down the coordinates of any targets you see. You yell around for Lieutenant Healy, I sent him to look for you half an hour ago, and haven't seen him since. He's probably trying to decide what pair of boots to wear."

"Oh misery," thought Eadie, "I've got to go out again."

He felt his way back along the passage again, and when he was about half-way back, the wall yielded suddenly to his touch. A door opened. Into his trembling heart came a ray of hope. If he should go into that room and shut that door, no one would be able to find him, and he would not have to go out into the storm of shell that was rocking the old farm. Do not think that Eadie was a coward. He was only careful. The men who had ingrowing consciences that would not let them stay underground when the chance was good, and that drove them always where duty called, are still in France, with a nice little cross at their head.

So then Eadie went in, and shut the door. He lighted a match, and could see by the tiny flame that this was a sort of boiler-room. Behind one of the boilers was a narrow space, into which a man might crawl, and pass the night without fear of discovery. The sergeant let his match go out, and cautiously wormed his way back of the iron framework. His outstretched hand brushed an arm. He drew back suddenly, every fiber in his body tingling. A tiny light flared from a flashlight. It showed the shaking artilleryman a stern face, a collar that bore a U. S. and a pair of crossed rifles.

"I'm looking for Lieutenant Healy," stammered Eadie.

"Oh," said the officer, "you must be the sergeant from the artillery. I've been looking for you quite a while. The colonel

wants us to go have a look-see. I just thought I'd step in here and make an inspection. A little inspection, you know; I was going by the door and I thought I might as well."

He peered earnestly at Eadie's face as he said this, but his flashlight was too small, and he could not make out the sergeant's expression.

"Well, I suppose we may as well go out, don't you think so?" said he.

They went out into the passage, and then climbed up the stairway to the courtyard. "Maybe you hadn't better tell the colonel where you found me," said the officer. "He might not understand. You know, I was supposed to be looking for you."

Again he looked at Eadie, but the poor man was busy swallowing his Adam's apple and did not hear him.

Day was just beginning to break, and one could make out dimly the various farm buildings around the yard. There were great holes in the roofs of these, and one of them was afire, and burning briskly. The courtyard was littered with branches. Along the front of the house, the side away from the river, was a line of men, sitting on the ground, their bayoneted rifles pointing skyward. As Eadie watched them, one unfixed his bayonet and threw it away.

"Comes a wild Hun in here," said this one, "he's goin' to be mad enough at me 'thout I go pokin' at him with that little bittee old brad awl. When he gets so close I can poke him with that, I aims to go away."

Then he winked at the sergeant, and lighted a cigaret.

"Come on," said the lieutenant, and began to run across the yard, and into the woods on the other side. Eadie followed. The woods were full of limbs that had been torn from the trees by the bombardment, and there were the remains of some wagons and a Ford truck there. Shells were falling steadily on the road on the other side of the trees, and every time a shell struck, the officer would change his course, so that he and the sergeant did nothing but run aimlessly in circles, jumping over fallen trees, and tearing their clothes on remnants of barbed wire.

Suddenly there was a tearing shriek. Eadie hurled himself to the ground, and the shell exploded within a few feet of him. He felt himself pushed to one side by a giant hand, the force of the falling earth striking him knocked the breath from his body. He wondered if he had been hit, and dared not move hand or foot, lest he find one or the other gone. At last he cautiously got up. His back and side were very lame where the dirt and stones thrown up by the explosion had struck him, and his ears rung, but otherwise he was unhurt.

Where was the officer? There was no sign, no vestige of him. He was gone as utterly as the snows of yesteryear. He, that hath stopped somebody's fist by getting his solar plexus in the way of it, can sympathize with that poor sergeant of artillery. To have at one moment a man by one's side, and the next to have him blown into fragments so small that there is not a shred of uniform, not a drop of blood to tell that he is gone, such an experience is very shattering to the morale of a green soldier.

And then from the ground under the sergeant's feet came a plaintive voice, imploring aid. Eadie jumped and then looked in the direction of the sound. There was a garbage pit there, and the lieutenant had fallen into it.

The sergeant could not forbear a slight snicker as he helped the officer back to solid ground again. His boots were plastered with decayed slum and coffee grounds, and festoons of spud peelings hung from him. He coughed and spit energetically. The odor of him was not that of roses, so that Eadie drew off a little way from him, and thought of putting on his gas-mask. At last Lieutenant Healy cleared his organs of speech of such matter as obstructed them. The first few paragraphs of what he said we will omit, inasmuch as it was rather unrestrained.

"Well," said he, "we haven't found anything of value yet, have we?"

"No, sir," said Eadie.

"Well, where can we go to see anything and not get killed?"

"We can go down the road a little way, and that will give us a pretty good view."

"Fine. I'll wait here, and you go get the information, then I'll take it in to the colonel. That will be a good division of labor, won't it?"

Eadie made no reply, being too polite, and started off down the road at a trot. The quicker he got back, the less time he would have to spend dodging shells.

And now a little geography: The Marne, in this section, flows a little south of west, or as a sailor would say, west southwest. A tiny stream called the Surmelin joins it at right angles from the south, east of the village of Chartrèves. West of the Surmelin is a high plateau, at the back of which was Eadie's battery. East of the smaller river is another plateau, but the eastern side of the valley was in the French sector. A regiment of American infantry held the bank of the Marne, at the confluence of the Surmelin, and from there into Château Thierry was American territory. The French had everything to the East, clear to Dormans, and farther, for all I know. Anyway, they folded their tents like the Arab, and went south, when the bombardment started, so it matters not what sector was allotted to them.

The road that the sergeant was on ran along the northern edge of the plateau, giving him a good view of the river. There was a high cloud of smoke, that filled all the valley of the Marne. There was a clamor from this cloud that sounded as if all the boiler-shops in the world were right there, going at full speed and working double shifts. Rockets soared high and burst, some green, some red, and some with clusters of stars. Then he looked directly east, at the heights across the Surmelin. There was a path that ran diagonally across the face of the opposite hill, like a long scar.

As I have said, that was in French territory, and Eadie could make out the frogs running down the hillside. Frogs! With those coal-scuttle helmets on? Those uniforms were surely gray. Jerries, without a doubt. They were well back of the American lines and in a position to shoot them up from the rear. Now Eadie had left his field-glasses in the O. P., but he could see quite plainly without the aid of any glass that the place he was in was no place for an artilleryman, and especially one who was unarmed. He retraced his steps as rapidly as might be to the farm.

"I couldn't see a thing, sir," he told the lieutenant. "I think I'll try to get back to the battery; I may be of some use there, and I never will be here."

"Let's see the colonel. He may have a message to take back." The colonel had one.

"Give him a copy of that report that just came in," said he to the man at the typewriter. "Now read it, memorize it, and put it in the top left-hand pocket of your blouse. Then if you are bumped off, some one can find the message. Now hurry, because we may be surrounded at any time."

The observer hugged himself to think that he would be far away when that happened, and then went up the stairs. In the courtyard he picked up an automatic, and slung it on the waist-belt of his breeches.

THE sergeant crossed the courtyard and went along the road to the east. At the place where the road swung into the court a great limb had been torn from a tree and cast down. It had fallen across the bodies of the horses of an escort wagon and partially concealed them. In back of them was another wagon, its teams stretched out in front, just as they had fallen. There were no kindly leaves over these. There was a whole wagon-train on that road, each wagon in line, each with its four horses before it, as if they had halted for a rest, and then lain down.

It took no second look to see that these beasts had borne their last burden. Tangled viscera protruded from their sides. A leg torn from one, and another with no head. Most of the train were covered with boughs scattered by the bombardment, but enough of it was visible to freeze the blood in the heart's innermost chamber.

Some distance from the farm gate was an ambulance, its roof torn away. The sergeant could see something on the seat in the back. He averted his eyes as he hurried by, for he knew it was a corpse, and in all his life he had never seen a dead man. The road was narrow, and the ambulance in the very center of it. When Eadie was half-way by, some unseen force made him look up. He gazed directly into the sightless eyes of a boy of sixteen, clad only in his shirt and breeches. The sergeant left the road and fled into a little clump of trees. If the Germans started fire on that road again, he could see where his mission would come to an abrupt end.

Eadie walked through the trees, parallel to the road, until he came to an opening from whence he could look toward Germany. He gasped. Twenty *drachen*—kite balloons—bobbed on the northern horizon. Fear descended upon this soldier

with the swoop of a hawk, seized him, whirled him about and dashed him to the ground. In his stumbling flight, Eadie nearly collided with a man sitting on a box. His chest was all shot to ribbons, and his face like yellow clay, but he was still alive.

"Seen any stretcher-bearers?" he said.

"No," said Eadie, "but I know they will be along soon."

"I 'spect I'll be dead 'fore they gits here," said the man stolidly.

"What got you?"

"Shell."

"Does it hurt bad?"

The man made no reply to this, and the observer was glad to go softly away. He decided to turn back to the road again. He could make better time on the roads, and there were just as many fearful things in the fields as anywhere else. He got back on the highway at a bend in the road. There was an open grove in front of him. At the bend was a group of horses standing patiently awaiting death, all with wounds in flank and belly. There was an ammunition cart with a dead man in back of it. But the grove! A hideous welter of rolling kitchens, water-carts, ammunition carts, every type of wagon, their hubs caught against trees, some overturned, and some a pile of matchwood. And so many poor dead horses!

They lay in every kind of position, some had been tied to trees, and had plunged until they had broken their necks. Man is not satisfied with killing his kind, he must needs drag the poor, patient horse to battle with him, and butcher him. And now the sergeant wept. A man called from the ditch and thrust up a leg from which the foot was blown off.

"Hey," he called, "do you see that? I been here since midnight, and it's about time I got out o' here."

"There'll be some ambulances along right away," said Eadie.

"They'll all be full and there'll be no room for me," said the man in the ditch.

"I'd take you in with me," said the sergeant, "but I'm carrying messages, and I'd get into a lot of trouble if I got caught. I tell you what, though, I'll send a man out from the first place I come to."

The man in the ditch seemed to be satisfied with this, for he made no further comment.

Farther down the road the sergeant met two men leading a third, who had been shot through both jaws. His face was swelled to an enormous size, and blood trickled from his mouth. Every so often his knees would buckle under him in a peculiar way, but he would recover himself and go on. Eadie saw quite a number of cases of this mysterious giving way of the knees later on, and before he saw Hoboken again, found out how it felt himself.

"Hey, trooper," called out one of the unwounded men, "where can we find a dressing-station? We been huntin' around these woods all morning."

"Do you see that farm-house over there?" pointing to where La Houy showed through the trees. "Well, there's one in there."

"Is it very far?" asked the other man, who was not wounded.

"Not very. It's the nearest one, anyway."

So the three went on, the two supporting the one in the middle, and holding him up when his knees went back on him.

After that Eadie saw no one. The fields were deserted under the blue sky. He could no longer hear the pounding from the valley, and there was no sound from our own guns. The German balloons floated lazily on the horizon. The sergeant realized that he was not making very good progress. He felt terribly alone, he yearned for some one to talk to, or even just to walk along with him, so that he wouldn't think so much about the man in the ditch, and the dead boy in the ambulance.

At last some signs of life. Around a bend in the road, about a hundred yards away was a farm-house, with men in olive drab, walking about. There was a motorcycle and side-car near the gate to the courtyard, and a little group of saddled horses standing in the road, with a soldier holding the reins and smoking. Even as Eadie quickened his pace, there was the roar of a thousand express trains. The house was at once enveloped in a cloud of black, black smoke, from which came swift darts of flame.

The horses seemed to be carried bodily across the road, like straws before the wind, and hurled all amongst each other into the ditch. Limbs flew from the trees as a child blows seeds from a dandelion. And all the while a gigantic rumble, as of innumerable troops of cavalry crossing all the covered bridges in the world. Truly it

was the sound of the steed of war, trampling that little farm into the dust.

And who shall blame a poor soldier, in that he ran shrieking into the fields, and cast himself to earth, and beat the ground with his clenched fists? The utter savagery of the destruction of that house, the stamping out of those lives with tons of steel, the suddenness of that blast of death—who could have seen and not been utterly unmanned?

For a long time Eadie lay with his eyes closed. He felt physically ill, and he had trouble in breathing. Possibly he had had a sniff or two of gas. He debated within himself whether he would go on, or stay where he was and pray for an early death. Then he remembered that that day was his birthday and that there was an unopened box waiting for him back at the battery position. He decided he would continue his journey.

It is not for me to attempt to describe the things that Eadie saw as he stumbled on his way, his chin on his shoulder, watching that far-away line of balloons, that swayed merrily in the breeze. Poor man, the memory of that Golgotha tore him shrieking from his sleep, long years after the Hun and the empire for which he fought were but memories.

At night a road in France, back of the lines, was crowded with motorcycles and ambulances, *fourgons* and slat-wagons, troops going up and troops coming back, limousines and touring-cars, horsemen, bicyclists, runners, telephone men, tractors, and guns of all sizes from one pounders to big fourteen-inch caterpillars. Fifth Avenue at Forty-second Street during the rush hour gives a good idea of it. And suddenly upon these crowded roads had fallen a hurricane of steel, a tornado of gas. There is no describing this, for to make a clear description, one must have something by way of comparison, and there was never anything since the world began that remotely resembles the bombardment prior to a general attack.

Eadie saw them all, those travelers of the night before. The wagon overturned in the ditch, the wreck of the burned motor-car, the horseman and his steed, so mingled one with the other that there was no telling which was horse or man, a company of infantry that had been caught in column formation. Out in the fields were others, some of them alive. A wounded man looks like a man, but a dead man looks like a heap of clothes that some one has tossed away, and you can always tell them apart in that manner.

There was a hedge that ran at right angles to the highway, from which protruded the muzzles of four seventy-fives. One of them still coughed bravely. Like a great wave from the ocean breaking on the beach, a wall of smoke rose suddenly before that hedge. The second surge broke directly over the gun muzzles, and the third rolled over them, and burst beyond. Then they rolled back, with that horrid, horrid sound of cold iron being pounded upon an anvil. Gradually the smoke cleared away. The one gun fired no more.

The sergeant remembered that about here there was a road that ran through the wheat, and down to a farm called Fontaine aux Charmes, or Les Aulnes Bouillants, whichever one it was, and from there it was only a few minutes' walk to Grand Heurtebise, where there was a battery of his regiment and a telephone. The farm was nearer than he thought, for he was in the wheat but a few minutes before he arrived at the gate. French farm-houses are built around the four sides of a square court, the living-quarters on one side, and the barns and carriage sheds on the other three.

They make admirable forts, as they are heavily built of stone. Moreover, there is always a deep cellar, where the wine is kept. Sometimes there are several different ones. These are used as first-aid stations, posts of command, and if there are enough, as retreats for the garrison during a bombardment.

The first thing the artilleryman saw as he entered the court was a rolling kitchen in a corner, with a marmite full of coffee beside it. While he was drinking a cupful, he looked carefully around for signs of life. The coffee was fairly hot, so that it hadn't been off the fire very long. Then his eye was caught by the familiar sign, "*Poste de Secours.*" It was painted on what had been the old hen-coops. Hens, by the way, are kept in little cupboards in the wall, like lockers in a gymnasium.

The cellar that was used as the aid post was very full. Eadie grabbed a sergeant with a Red Cross arm-band, and demanded speech with him.

"Have you got an extra stretcher-bearer around here?" he asked.

"We haven't got any extra ones," said the sergeant, "but we can let you have one."

"Have to have two," said Eadie, "I can't go with him. I'm carrying messages from the front."

"What do you want them for?"

"There's a wounded man in the ditch about a half a mile from here; he's got his foot blown off. I couldn't bring him in, but I promised I'd send some one out after him."

"All right, you tell the men where he is. God knows he might as well stay in the ditch as come in here. We won't be able to evacuate these men while this bombardment keeps up, and when it stops, there will be so many to go out it will be days before they all get back to hospital. My bandages are all gone, and if this bird hasn't got a first-aid packet on him, he's out of luck."

The first-aid packet was a little tin box with two bandages in it, that every soldier was supposed to carry on his belt, in a little canvas case.

"No one would be fool enough to go around without one," said the artilleryman.

"Where's yours?" asked the medical sergeant.

"Why," said Eadie in some confusion, "it was on my pistol belt, and I hung the belt on a tree last night. When I came away I was in kind of a hurry and forgot to get it."

"You're like all the rest, they put their Bull Durham or chewin' in the first-aid pouch and throw the packet away, so when they get hit, they bleed to death. Here's a couple of wops. Show them where your man is and they'll bring him in. I've got to give some hypos."

"Isn't there a doctor here?" asked the observer.

"Sure, that's him over there. His is the third pair of feet stickin' out from under the blanket. Same shell got three of them."

The artilleryman did not look in the indicated direction.

"Now, here," said he to the two stretcher-bearers; "I'll tell you where this man is. Go out to the main road, and then go north on it to where the road forks to go down to Étampes. You don't know where that is, of course, but there is an engineer camp just to the left of it. Take the turn to the right, and the next turn to the left. He's in the right-hand ditch about two hundred yards from the turn. Is that plain?"

"No," said the two wops together.

"Listen!" said Eadie, and repeated his instructions very carefully. "Now can you find the place?"

The two shook their heads stolidly.

"I doan spik ver' much Engleesh," said one.

The time was ripe for some hair-raising profanity, but I have remarked that Eadie did not swear. But he had not been in the regular Army all that time for nothing. He closed his fist, and swung it in a short arc that terminated on the point of the last speaker's jaw—the whole operation being what is known as a "sock."

"Now," said he, fiercely, turning to the other man, "see that road? Left face, then right face, then left face. Ketchum man in ditch, and if you don't find him, you better not come back."

The two turned and went out, Eadie giving the man he had not hit assistance with a steel-shod toe.

"A non com. should show no partiality," said he. "Couldn't speak English! Huh! They'd a whole lot rather sit down cellar than go out on that road and bring in wounded."

Then the artilleryman turned and resumed his way.

Eadie missed his way in the wheat, so that when he finally came out on the high road, he had no idea where he was. For a man that was supposed to be able to find his way anywhere in the dark, he made a sad mess of getting back to his destination in broad daylight. However, he was not the only man in the American Army that forgot all he ever knew that day. He came quite suddenly upon a company of French troops. They were sitting patiently in the ditch, chewing bits of sausage. Their officer hailed the artilleryman.

"*Qu'est-ce qu'on fait la-haut?*" asked he, nodding toward the front.

"Ah," said Eadie, "*tu parles d'une sale guerre.*"

And then he told him, briefly, that the enemy had crossed the Marne and had taken the heights of the Surmelin, but that the end of the valley was still held by American troops.

"Poor stuff," said the French officer, "because the Boches will take Condé-en-Brie, and then cross to Courboin, so that all this sector will be cut off. The Americans should have retreated, and then we would still have an intact line of defense, instead of a salient, with one flank unprotected."

"*Zut alors! Vieux verminard,*" said Eadie, "how could we retreat? Our officers wouldn't know what command to give, because we have no such word in our language."

That terminated the conversation. Perhaps Eadie should not have called the officer such familiar names, but the artilleryman had a small opinion of the French at that particular time.

In a short time, the road began to become less strange. The country round about took on a familiar aspect. A voice hailed him.

"Oh, sergeant, hey! Hey!" There was a corporal from Eadie's battery, named Ashman, sitting under the shade of a bush.

"What are you doing here?" asked Eadie.

"Waitin' to guide ammunition-trucks to the batttery position. Can't use the old road any more—have to take 'em in through the woods."

The corporal's face was white and drawn, and he kept looking up into the sky nervously, as if he expected something to fall on him.

"How's the battery?"

"Oh, man! You never saw such a mess. The Dutch have been steam-rollin' us all night and this morning. They got a direct hit on Number Two piece. A lotta guys got killed. You better not go over there; it ain't safe for a man at all. The outfit are all in dugouts, anyway."

"In dugouts! Aren't they firing?"

"Been out of ammunition since nine o'clock."

Eadie turned and ran the short distance to the battalion headquarters. The major was sitting by the telephone in an upper room, with one or two staff officers near by. They all showed the effects of the night's strain in their unshaven faces and red eyes.

"Sir," said the artilleryman, "I've just come back from the infantry headquarters, and have a message from the colonel. I meant to get into Grand Heurtebise and telephone it, but I lost my way in the wheat."

The major read the slip of paper, folded it, and put it in his pocket without comment. The message told him that the Germans had crossed the river, had taken Fossoy, that the French had retreated, leaving the right flank of the division in the air, and that no reports had been received from some of the forward companies since the bombardment began, so that it was very probable that they had been captured or destroyed.

This was cheering to a man who had kept telephone lines to his batteries all night by superhuman efforts, and who was meditating how he was going to keep communication open, now that the telephone men were all casualties. He knew of at least four French batteries that had been silenced, and a runner had come in from the other American artillery regiment in the division and said that the men in his outfit were fighting hand to hand in the gun positions.

"Did you see any of the enemy?" the major asked Eadie.

"Not on our side of the Surmelin, sir."

"Well, I guess that's all. Report to your battery commander. Do you know what was in that message?"

"Yes, sir."

"Keep it between your teeth, then."

A throng of soldiers clustered about the sergeant as he went out of the house.

"What's goin' on up there?"

"Have the Boche got across?"

"How are the doughboys makin' out?"

"Come on an' have somethin' to eat."

"Gee," said Eadie, "I nearly forgot. I've got a box waiting for me. Today is my birthday, and I'd better go and eat it before I get bumped off. No canned hash for me today. I'll take a cigaret if any one has one handy."

Some one gave him a cigaret, and he started back to his battery. He went in through the woods, following a path that Ashman showed him. This brought him out back of the kitchen. There was no shelling going on now; perhaps the enemy was resting his gun crews. There had been plenty of it the night before, though; the bushes were chopped to bits, great trees had been torn in two, there were yawning holes in the ground. There were a number of unexploded shells lying about, and these the observer gave a wide berth. They were the first duds he had seen. At the

kitchen, the cook was standing on the tongue of the chow-gun, madly trying to fry some bacon. By the pitted earth, one could see that Fritz had had an eye on that place.

"Hi, Conrad," called the sergeant, "how's things?"

He felt a lot better now that he was back among familiar faces once more. Somehow he felt safer.

"You back?" said the cook. "Ah thought you-all was dead long ago. Come back fo' chow, I reckon—" a savage turning over of bacon with a long fork—"craves nutriment, they does, whether Ah gets killed makin' it or not."

Conrad jumped off the pole and gazed earnestly into the coffee boiler, muttering to himself. Conrad hailed from the interior of No'th Ca'lina, and the loss of his habitual calm was startling.

Some men came down the path from the guns. Our old friend Ham and the Frog, with another named Sployd. They greeted the sergeant effusively. Ham's face was the color of clay, and his eyes had a hunted look. This was the more startling since he was over six feet tall, and built in proportion. These men pounded each other on the back with something of hysteria in their manner.

"——," said Ham, "you never saw anything like it. The battery is about cleaned out. Wilson and McLure got killed the first—a shell got a direct hit on 'em."

Eadie's brain reeled. If he hadn't gone to the O. P. in McLure's place, he might have been killed himself.

"What's the matter?" the observer asked Sployd, who seemed in deadly fear of his own shadow.

"Sergeant," said this one, earnestly, "I seen enough today to keep me awake the rest of my life. I'm tellin' you I won't ever be right again. Why, up there, I seen one o' them frog artillerymen get cut right in two."

"That's right," said Ham; "half o' him's settin' in the wheat now. Looks like he was standin' in a hole up to his waist."

"I'm wearin' his leggins," said the Frog, displaying his shins clad in the high leather coverings that the French mounted troops wore.

"Come up to my dugout," said Eadie, "and we'll open that box."

The three looked at each other, and Sployd seemed about to speak, but a look from Ham silenced him.

They went on up the causeway, that was greatly changed from the time, not twenty-four hours ago, when Ham had been digging and the sergeant had swung his legs and debated whether the Boche would ever attack or not. The roadway had been torn out entirely in places by the explosion of shells. They averted their eyes, all four of them, from the place where Wilson and McLure had pitched their tent. The men they met all had a strained, stunned expression on their white faces, so different from the care-free countenances of the day before.

"These men certainly are pale," said Eadie, "what makes them look like that?"

"You ought to see yourself," said Ham. "Your face ain't much whiter than a snowman's."

They stopped when they came opposite the guns. Number Two had been dragged out of the line, and was lying sadly on its side, one wheel in bits, and the gun-shield a mass of holes and torn metal. Shallow holes had been dug alongside each gun and the men were all in these. Through a rift in the trees could be seen a German balloon, far, far away. The four withdrew hurriedly.

They climbed down the side of the causeway to where Eadie's little shelter had been, and then Ham, the Frog and Sployd, drew off a little, like friends do from a coffin when a relative of the deceased draws near. A shell had burst a few feet from the structure, and the fragments had made a pile of firewood out of the boxes from which it had been built.

Eadie silently pulled his slicker out of the wreckage and held it up. There was not a piece of it as large as the palm of a man's hand that was not pierced through and through. A heap of leather scraps remained of his saddle-bags. He pulled away the débris where the head of his bunk had been. There were a few bits of a white wooden box, a cheese all covered and impregnated with dirt, a mass of crumbs that had been a cake, some cans of sardines and boned chicken, flattened and torn, and a mass of paper scraps that had been cigarets.

The sergeant began gingerly to turn over the mangled dirt. Silently, with tight lips, he took out the neck of a broken bottle, the bottom of two more, and a torn piece of tin-foil. He placed these side

by side on one of the remaining boxes, and eyed them for some minutes. Then he stood up, and spoke.

His language was lurid and crimson; it suggested the bubbling of burning sulphur. He spat out his words between his teeth in a manner that made the flesh creep, and the neck hairs stand on end. The three stood silent and abashed, for it is an awful thing to see a fellow being fall from grace. At last he stopped to regain breath.

"Of all the places in France for those unspeakables to throw their illegitimate shells, they had to pick out my dugout. I'll bet they knew there was a box of chow in it." Eadie panted heavily.

"Well, anyway," said Sloyd, to cheer him, "you can be thankful they didn't have your name written on that shell."

"I'll bet I know what was writ on that shell," said the Frog.

"What was that?" demanded the others.

"I'll betcha they writ 'Happy Birthday' on it."

WILD JUSTICE

by **J. Allan Dunn**

Author of "Two Men and a Boat," "The Island," etc.

DIVING was over for the day. Smoke curled from the galley pipe of the pearling-lugger *Halcyon*, lying off Thursday Island. The ever chafing currents of Torres Straits swirled in the change from ebb to flood, flashing under the gathering brilliance of the sunset.

Two whale-boats were overside, fended off by a native in the stern, sulky at the job. The skin divers and pearl-workers were gathered together in two groups by the rail. They looked with uneasy eyes toward the cabin or at the second mate, who stood lounging by the mainmast, his gaze upon them, a gun ostentatiously prominent in a belt holster. Their usual cheeriness at the day's end, work over, food and leisure in prospect, was absent. There was court martial in the cabin, summary justice to be served. The Kanakas, quartered ashore, were detained to see sentence passed and carried out.

In handcuffs and leg-irons Oku, best diver of the outfit, squatted on an empty box in the traderoom, stoldily awaiting his fate. Oku was from Tahiti, one of the five Polynesians of the pearling-crew. Tiri, his brother, was in the bows with three compatriots. The fifth, Vaiki, cousin to Oku, was in the cabin with the skipper and the first mate, giving testimony against Oku.

The rest of the native workers were in the waist of the lugger, Melanesians all, plum-colored, breech-clouted, with frizzy, fuzzy mops of hair ranging in color from dirty orange to black. Strips of bone and shell were thrust through their noses.

With their ragged ear-lobes trailing almost to their shoulders, short clay pipes, safety pins and ornaments of brass and shell fitted to holes in the leathery flaps; their flat nostrils dilating nervously, their blubbery lips parting with a glimpse of betel-stained teeth, muttering to each other in low gutturals, they were a wild-looking lot. Their splayed toes picked at the crumbling deck putty with the deftness of baboons. Their shallow eyes shifted constantly, like those of monkeys. Some were red-eyed with years of reef-diving in ten, twelve, even sixteen fathoms. They seemed more like half-trained animals than men, avoiding the cool and masterful look of the mate. Most of them were scarred with tribal wales. All of them carried their pearl knives, suspended about their necks on sennit cords.

The Tahitians were different—lighter of skin, better featured, better in form and muscle, less furtive of manner. They too talked in low tones, and the fine eyes of Tiri flashed now and then as he glanced aft or at the second mate, who regarded them all with a placid scorn, born of experience. He was one of their masters, a dominant white, together with the skipper and the first mate in supreme authority over infractions of all rules.

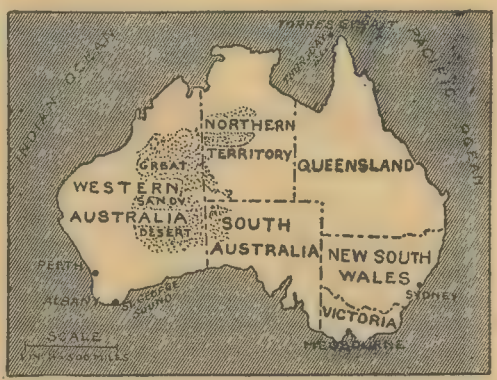
Behind the skipper was the Pearling Commission; but Captain Meeker of the *Halcyon*, like other masters of the pearling-fleet, exercised the right of dealing with offenders, and the commission seldom interfered with such prerogatives, save in extreme cases. The crime of Oku was a serious one. He had stolen a pearl of great value, according to Vaiki.

There was a stir among the Melanesians, and the Tahitians turned and watched where they pointed. Nosing about in search of garbage, a shark displayed its unusual length by the position of back fin and the top lobe of his tail. The tossing overboard of galley scraps and "burley," or oyster offal, from the luggers of the fleet, invariably attracted the sea tigers; and some of them, attaching themselves to certain vessels, became known to the divers through various characteristics.

Rightly or not, the cruising shark that was prowling about the *Halcyon*, marked by the white scar of an ancient wound from spear, knife or harpoon, was considered a man-eater. Its presence excited the Kanakas, speculating upon the punishment to be given Oku, guessing that the shark would be used in its carrying out.

Captain Meeker was hard of feature, hard of hand and hard of heart. His one object was to get all the work possible out of his divers and all the shell and pearls possible from the reefs at the least expense. The Melanesians were signed on for the season, the Tahitians paid by the tonnage of the shell they collected.

Many skippers gave a premium on pearls. Meeker did not. He was handier with fist, rope's end, foot and belaying-pin than he was with rewards; and his two mates



were of the same hard-boiled, hard-shelled school. His only largess was in curses and blows, and his system of fines for any lack in the scale he had established as a fair day's work saved him the payment of many a fairly earned dollar. He was a cheat and a bully.

Oku, best diver, was worst treated. He was sent to fourteen, fifteen, sixteen-fathom reefs that proved most prolific in pearls; but he was paid by shell rating. The more frequent the gems, the better their quality, the sicker were the oysters, with shells deep-wrinkled and distorted, with nacre of scant surface and dull luster. The deeper the water, the more exhausting the work and the smaller the contents of the diver's bag.

The Melanesians were contract laborers. The Tahitians had been wooed to service with many promises, none of which Meeker intended to carry out, many of which he had already welshed on.

The complaints of Oku, backed by Tiri as spokesmen for their crowd, had been met by the threat that they would not be carried back to Papeete but left on Thursday

Island. They had been shipped on at Sydney with this understanding, for they had been three years from Tahiti, and their hearts were sick for its pleasant groves of palm and breadfruit and banana, for its crystal streams and bright lagoons, the cozy village, the palatable food, the flowers, the songs, the laughter of their own people.

Meeker had never entertained the slightest idea of sailing four thousand miles to Papeete unless an exceptional find of pearls and the prospect of a paying market in that South Sea clearing-house for those gems offered him a distinct advantage. Neither did he propose to pay out passage money for his divers.

This Oku and his fellows first suspected, then believed; and it had soured their natures. Their spirits were heavy, and they pined for home. Their pay had been docked and delayed; they had been swindled on the weighing of the shell, shortened in tobacco and other rations. If Oku had taken a pearl, it would, to his reasoning and sense of justice, have merely helped to adjust the balance between him and the skipper.

To Meeker, the brown man and the black was merely a machine of bone and muscle and certain capacities for earning him money. His rule was the rule of iron, of the steel hand ungloved by velvet, the steel automatic and the leaden bullet, with the mysterious *mana*—the spirit power—of the white man backing it all.

VAIKI fawned in the cabin, making a bargain.

"If I speak what I know, you send me back along Papeete, you give me all my *tala* (money) come along of me?"

"All that I give," Meeker lied glibly. "Suppose you no tell I give you nothing. Maybe you try get piece of that pearl. Oku no give, you get mad along Oku."

"No. I no want. I no steal along of you. Every one speak Vaiki good boy."

Meeker winked at his mate.

"Hanged if I see just why he peached," he said. "They usually stick with their own."

"Oku's got a girl back at Papeete," said the mate. "He figgers on havin' her when he gits back with his wages. Vaiki wants the same girl."

"Oh! That's what sp'iled the soup! How d'you know?"

"Heard 'em talkin'. That's my business."

"Sounds reasonable. Go on, Vaiki."

"Three time he come up, Oku no open shell."

This was the rule of the lugger.

"Oku he heap smart along shell. Plenty he *sabe* pearl oyster. Four time he empty bag, he put foot quick on one shell. Think I no see. Bimeby he put shell in *pareu* (loincloth). Bimeby he rest. I make believe I sleep. Bimeby Oku open shell, take out fine pearl. I see. He look quick. I close eye. I no see where he put pearl but I hear shell go along water.

"Oku no good," he went on passionately, emphasizing all his words with telling pantomime. "Vaiki good boy. I speak. *Kapitani* fix me up along *tala*, *tabaki*, maybe *kini-kini*," he added, with a look at the bottle of Hollands.

"Give him a drink, Jim," said Meeker. "Then go an' git Oku."

"You bring Oku along of me in here?" demanded Vaiki.

"We sure do. Take a drink, you white-livered skunk, an' see you speak the same talk."

Vaiki gulped down the gin and folded his arms. It was plain that he did not fancy facing Oku, bound though the latter was.

The shark was still cruising near the lugger, the Kanakas regarding him fascinatedly.

"Chuck him some burley to keep him up, Mr. Simmons," said the first mate. "I've a notion we'll be needin' him."

"It's the *kai-kanâk*" (man-eater).

"What of it? So much the better. Keep those beggars in hand."

Below deck, Oku had seen the shark through the port-hole and guessed what might be coming to him. They had taken his knife from him. If only they would let him have it! That, and a word with his brother. He knew that suspicion was equivalent to guilt with the skipper; the mere thought of having lost a valuable pearl would bring out all his brutality.

They had searched Oku as thoroughly as a Kimberley foreman searches a Kaffir suspected of concealing a diamond—and they had found nothing. It made small difference. He was to be used as an example for the maintenance of what Meeker called discipline.

Across the glowing water he looked at Thursday Island, mean and small and comparatively barren; but he saw only the

glowing crags of Orohena with its twinned battlements, the heights of Aorai and all the lovely shoreland of Tahiti-uni, the verdant stream-fed vales, the emerald groves where the smoke of the fires curled up from the villages.

He saw Tatua, deep-eyed, firm-breasted, with a flower in her black and shining tresses standing on the white sand, watching for the return of Oku, the traveler, bearing gifts and riches.

And then—that vision faded as the burley flung by the mate's orders spattered into the water and the *kai-kanaka* came gliding up, leisurely but swift, turning over so that his whitish belly showed and his maw opened in a serrated crescent; jaws wide enough to swallow a man, rows of teeth sharp enough to shear off a limb as an ax lops off a bough.

Oku showed no sign of fear when the first mate entered and roughly ordered him to follow. He went with his irons clinking. At the head of the companionway he looked for Tiri and gave him a meaning glance. The three Tahitians started to move aft, and the jabbering Melanesians shifted uneasily, checked by a barked, imperative command from the second mate, whose hand rested on the butt of his gun.

The Chinese cook stood in the galley door, his yellow, shining face craned out. Behind the second mate the burly negro quartermaster grinned at Oku disdainfully.

Oku drew himself up to his full height and gazed scornfully at Vaiki, who tried to return the look defiantly but failed and winced at the few words of low, hot anger that Oku flung at him.

"If I live, you shall die. Your blood is not of my blood. You are a bastard and a coward."

The approaching triumph of Vaiki, in which Oku was to be left maimed on Thursday Island—dead perhaps, swallowed by the shark—while he, Vaiki, alone of all the Tahitians returned to Papeete and so to Tatua, a wealthy wooer, suddenly lessened and crumpled like a stuck balloon. For a moment he saw himself as Oku saw him, traitor to his blood, informer, a thing whose name would be forgotten among the villages if the truth was ever learned!

The lingering spur of the alcohol revived his courage. His victory reinflated, and he beheld himself talking dowry with the father of Tatua.

She was a stake well worth playing for. She had been only fourteen when they left. Now she was seventeen, an opened bud, a ripened fruit. And she had sworn to wait for Oku, not knowing she was thus keeping herself for Vaiki, whom she had affected to despise. It would be good to possess her.

Some day he might whisper in her ear why it was that Oku did not return. He could say she lied if she repeated it. It would only be a whip in reserve for a wife who was not sufficiently loving—or dutiful. He stole a sidelong glance at Oku, standing upright, his face disdainful, listening to the captain.

Again a doubt assailed him. Suppose the *kapitani* did not keep faith with him for his information? He felt the tremor of the player whose last stake is on the table and who fears the fairness of the man who holds the cards.

"You give up that pearl, Oku," said Meeker, "and I'll let you off this time with a fine. If you don't——"

He paused significantly.

Oku's great chest, the cage of the tremendous bellows that furnished him with resistance to stay down deep nearly four minutes while he robbed the coral of gem-bearing shells, rose and fell slightly. His nostrils lifted, but he said nothing.

"I've got it all down in the log-book," went on Meeker, striving for special entertainment in making the diver show some fear. "Witness all sworn reg'lar. Jest what you did. Hid the shell under yore foot, then opened it an' took out the pearl when you thought Vaiki was sleepin'."

Oku's eyes turned toward Vaiki, showing the white, the glance eloquent of contempt.

"You chucked the shell overboard an' hid the pearl. I want it."

Meeker leaned forward across the table.

"I want it, you —— Kanaka, or I'll take it out of yore hide an' body. You come across along of that pearl. You speak where you hide or overside you go. We've burleyed up the *kai-kanaka* with the white scar an' there'll be more erlong in a minute. If they leave you alone I'll say you're innercent. If not, by ——, you're guilty, an' you deserve what you git."

In all South Sea tribes there were, as Meeker knew, various ordeals by poison, boiling water and such a test as he was going to use, to determine guilt in witchcraft or adultery. He was not the first skipper to

apply it, and the fact that there was such an elemental custom made it more impressive, less likely to be challenged by the natives.

"I think maybe that all same murder, *kapitani*," said Oku. "I think maybe the commission no like that."

"Commission!"

Meeker rose snarling.

"You'll talk commission to me, you thieving dog! I'll swing you up or I'll flay you alive if you rob me, and no blighted commission will tell *me* where to tack an' veer."

He came from behind the table and shook his fist in Oku's face, then struck him open-handed. The marks of his fingers showed dull purple on the Tahitian's golden-brown cheek.

Every muscle of the native's magnificent body seemed to tense at once as if he would break his irons and brain or strangle the skipper. Meeker recoiled a little before the fury he had evoked. His hand reached back of him for his gun, and the first mate grasped Oku's arms from behind.

The diver freed himself with a twist and then stood still, facing the muzzle of the captain's weapon.

Meeker himself was making a struggle for restraint. He could not go too far. Oku's mention of the commission was a lash that at once irritated him and reminded him of authority that had already warned him for alleged unnecessary cruelty.

He had his mates to stand back of him, the *Halcyon's* own crew to swear as he bade them; but he was not on the high seas; Thursday Island was now a fortified coaling-station where the tale of murder might find a hearing and an awkward sequel. But he was determined to go through with what custom permitted.

"I'll put a rope round you an' give you yore knife," he said. "Then you can talk it out with the sharks."

A faint gleam came into Oku's eyes as he heard that he would not be denied his knife. He was conscious of it and lowered his lids. He knew that if he won through the ordeal that would be the end of the matter, if his wounds healed.

"You let me speak along Tiri?" he asked. "Maybe I die."

He spoke with no semblance of begging a favor. Though his attitude won none from Meeker, the skipper fancied that he might be weakening, that his brother might counsel him to give up the pearl.

"Take him on deck and let his brother chin with him," he said to the mate. "Then give him his knife and rig the line. I'll be out in a minute."

He motioned Vaiki from the cabin with a jerk of his head and swallowed half a glass of neat Hollands. The informer went to the rail to watch the tragedy he had invoked. The Melanesians regarded him apathetically; the three Tahitians glowered at him. Tiri, summoned by the mate, passed him with two words hissed in a fierce whisper.

Vaiki's enjoyment was by way of being spoiled. The salt of hatred, jealousy and revenge had lost much of its savor in his mouth, which was suddenly dry when he tried to moisten it. Tiri's words were those of South Sea vendetta.

It was fortunate that the season was nearly over. He would have to be wary of Tiri, night and day. But in the end he would triumph when he sailed away and left them on Thursday Island, doomed to live as best they could for another season, to enter that in debt and so work on in exile while he, Vaiki, would be back in the village near Papeete, with Tatua preparing fish, pounding taro, weaving mats, fawning upon the favor of her lord.

THE talk between the brothers was brief. The sun was nearing the horizon. Meeker was impatient to get through with the thing. He had lost his pearl; but he did not mean to lose his supper, which was nearly ready, nor to forego the appetizer in the example he was going to make of Oku.

A rope was tied about the diver's waist, held by the negro quarter-master and the mate. His irons were taken off, his knife restored to him.

Oku took the blade and stood poised on the rail like a bronze statue against the sun. The shark had finished the offal and now swam up and down with an expectant eye. He knew that sundown would bring him more garbage. This was his lay. Everything that came overboard from the *Halcyon* was his perquisite. The other luggers had their scavengers. As yet no other sharks were ranging near.

Oku breathed deep, filling his lungs, stretching his limbs, cramped by the irons

and his confinement. Once he looked at the land, then at his brother. Vaiki he did not deign to notice.

All seemed to hold their breath. The lapping of the turning tide sounded like a series of chuckles.

There came a swift tapping. Meeker was knocking out the ashes from the bowl of his pipe on the head of a belaying-pin. He filled and lighted it carefully and mounted the rail for a better view, steadying himself to the roll by the mainstays.

Oku jumped feet first, sinking down in a swirl of bubbles. The sun was too low for much transparency; but they could see him sinking far down as the shark, attracted by the splash, glided toward the disturbance, then with a tail stroke headed downward.

The ordeal was not a fair one, even to natives. In their minds sharks were allied with the gods, imbued with intelligence. Not all of them were man-eaters. Ordinarily there would have been a good chance of Oku not being attacked, even by a brute that hung around a ship for scraps. Therein lay the test of guilt. But this one was a notorious *kai-kanaka*. Man-meat to him was a dainty.

Tiri, his hands clasping the rail until the knuckles showed white, strained out to watch the combat. Meeker, puffing his pipe, waited to give the word to the mate to haul in. He did not want Oku killed. He was not sure if he wanted him maimed. That would lose him a diver.

But whenever he thought of the pearl his resentment flamed. As described by Vaiki, even allowing for exaggerations, it was the best of the season, worth a good many hundred dollars. Oku would have selected his shell unerringly.

Oku, poised in the water, legs and arms apart, like a great frog, awaited the rush of the shark. His knife had been in his left hand when he went over. He shifted it to the right, the sennit loop about his wrist. He stripped off his loin-cloth and wound it round his left hand and wrist. He was almost as much at home in water as he was on land. For three, perhaps four, minutes, though he had not had time properly to "take his breath," he did not fear the odds against him of the monster in its own element.

After that, if he had to come to the surface the odds became heavier. That he could continue to elude the beast for some time was certain.

Left to himself, he held no doubt that he could dodge and climb aboard unscathed. That would not be allowed. And to play tag with the grisly, cold-blooded brute was not his intention. The rope that might prove his salvation was also a handicap.

The light was rapidly failing. The surface of the sea was still bright, though marred by the rip of the tide. He could see the shark coming down toward him in a gray bulk with just a hint of phosphorescence in its trail.

He was out of position; and, as the *kai-kanaka* rolled with open mouth, Oku clipped his lower legs together and stroked with one hand, passing beneath the baffled fish. He made no wasted motion. His skin scraped against the pebbly hide; and once more he spread-eagled, almost motionless, watching the monster turn with a great surge and drive for him again, its long snout pointed a little downward, its cunning prompting it to keep the man uppermost.

Oku waited, dribbling air from his lungs. The great hazard, the rope, had traded clear. His attitude was that of a duelist, his swathed left arm a little extended, the right curved, ready for a stroke.

Along the rail black men and white strained outward, seeing little but whorls of yeasty water, tiny bubbles of Oku's precious air breaking on the tide.

The shark turned, lunging upward. Oku, with automatic adjustment of his balance almost as perfect as that of the fish, upended. A mighty scissors-clip sent him straight toward the widening jaw with its rows on rows of back-set, fast-embedded teeth.

He thrust his bound left arm fairly into the open maw, deep into the gullet of the shark. And, before the jaws could close, he lunged his knife to the hilt in its belly, ripping viciously. His hand and wrist slid into the wound and he turned the knife before he withdrew it and slashed again.

The jaws clamped on his arm, tearing the flesh, but he felt no pain. Neither did the sea tiger, yet it felt the knife in its belly, severing its entrails, plunging through its hide in fierce stroke after stroke. It thrashed the water, dragging Oku with it through the turmoil that was streaked with blood.

The crimson, oily fluid floated to the surface, hardly distinguishable in the gold and purple of the sunset painting the sea. But the watching natives saw it, and a

guttural, "Eyah!" came from the Melanesians. The Tahitians closed their lips. The mouths of the rest were open as they thrilled with the excitement of the fight. The skipper's pipe went out, and he swore in his eagerness, the lust of cruelty in his eyes, stamped on his weather-burned features.

"Keep that rope slack, blast your black soul!" roared the mate at the negro quartermaster. "Give him a chance!"

The man obeyed. In his mental ferment he had unconsciously started to tauten the line.

Suddenly Tiri sprang to the rail, knife in hand. The skipper's pistol was out in a flash while he bellowed at him. Tiri hesitated; and then out of the seething waters there popped a black-sleek head, and a wild shout went up.

It was Oku, his eyes flashing as he stroked with one arm, gulping down the welcome air. His knife still swung from the sennit loop on his wrist. Rising more slowly beside him came the great bulk of the *kai-kanaka*, belly up, the whitish skin pink in the sunset, rent in half a score of places, from which the blood ran as the monster feebly struggled. It intestines protruded; it had lost control, partly paralyzed by Oku's vicious stabs which had reached some vital spot, swiftly dying from that and the loss of blood.

The divers were beside themselves with excitement. Meeker swore and spat into the sea, then turned away.

"Haul in," called the first mate. "Easy now, you lubber! *Easy!*"

Oku's face was drawn and gray, but he smiled up at his brother as the line drew him alongside and a dozen hands gripped him and drew him over the low freeboard.

The cloth was gone from his left arm, which was terribly lacerated from elbow to wrist. Blood spouted from flesh rips and severed veins. It dripped on the deck as he stood weakly against the foremast, Tiri helping to support him.

The shark was beginning to drift slowly shoreward with the tide. The same current carried the blood away from the rest of the fleet and the scent of it from the other sharks that were patrolling the luggers for galley refuse.

"Take him below," said the first mate to Tiri.

Oku's brother and the two other Tahitians picked up the wounded victor and carried him to the forward companion.

"I'll be down," added the mate. "I'll fix him up. By all that's holy, he's a man!"

The mate's own manhood, roused by the plucky fight, had reversed his sympathies. The second mate ordered the divers into the shore boats.

"Goin' to keep him aboard?" he asked the first.

"Yep—for tonight anyway. Wait for his brother and the others."

The first mate hurried aft and encountered the skipper.

"What's the idea?" asked the skipper.

"I want the permanganate," said the mate. "And a shot of squareface. You ain't goin' to let him bleed to death. If he dies you ain't goin' to keep this thing quiet, Meeker."

"That don't git me my pearl."

"To —— with the pearl! If he's got it I'm here to say he earned it."

Meeker gave the mate a sullen look but said nothing. The mate had shares in the *Halcyon*, and his words had weight besides reason.

As he disappeared into the cabin for disinfectant and stimulant the skipper slowly followed. He met Vaiki, skulking on the starboard side, away from the boats. Meeker cursed at him and accompanied every oath with a kick.

"You git along where you belong. For'ard!" he yelled, venting his spleen. "Git ashore, you —— sneak! And stay there!"

But Vaiki was not in the boats when they left. He kept out of the way in the growing dusk, disconsolate and afraid. He knew that the skipper had repudiated him and that Oku was still alive. More, there was Tiri; and the words of Tiri were still plain in their meaning.

Tiri was in the second boat with his fellow Tahitians. He had the steering-oar and guided the boat alongside the dead shark, slipped a bight about the root of its tail, and they towed it to the beach. When the boats had been hauled up and the divers started for their quarters Tiri remained behind with the shark, motioning his comrades ahead.

The Melanesians gazed at him with dull curiosity. They fancied that he wanted to perform some ritual over the *kai-kanaka*, perhaps to cut out its teeth or to take some

of its hide for a knife-haft or the head of a conjure drum.

The swift twilight had vanished. Lights had broken out on the pearling fleet and ashore. Tiri was alone with the dead shark.

ON THE *Halcyon* Oku lay in a bunk, his wounds cleaned and dressed. His arm might not recover full strength, never its symmetry; but the mate was sure he would not lose it. The blood of Oku was healthy; his injuries would heal quickly. The salt water had started to cleanse them; the loin-cloth had helped; the permanganate had completed the asepsis. He had pleasant thoughts, and he was well content.

Vaiki ventured to the galley to beg for supper. The Chinese cook showed him a knife longer and sharper than his own, an Oriental fury that completely routed Vaiki's despondent soul. He coiled up on a cable in the bows, where Meeker presently found him. The skipper had supped, and he had washed down his meal with plenty of liquor. He was in better mood; but the sight of Vaiki roused him again to fury.

"I told you go along shore," he said.

Vaiki whined—

"I plenty 'fraid go along that place."

Meeker laughed.

"The —— you are! Wal, you're goin'. Git up! Now then, over you go, an' swim for it."

Vaiki shivered. He was not very much afraid of the swim. It was not far, the tide was with him and the *kai-kanaka* was dead; but the land looked very inhospitable to him beside the comparative safety of the lugger. He cowered close to the cable.

Meeker, with a burst of anger, seized him by the loin-cloth and the scruff of his neck. Vaiki clawed at the cable. The skipper shifted his grip from neck to bushy hair, and Vaiki yelled with pain and let go of the rope. The captain hauled him to the side and bundled him overboard.

Vaiki hit with a resounding splash amid a burst of the seafire that was rising and breaking in luminous stars all over the anchorage. He struck out reluctantly for the shore, trailing flame, with Meeker's lurid prophecies of what would happen to him if he tried to board the *Halcyon* again stringing after him. He was hungry and dispirited, and he let the flood direct his course.

Ashore, under the stars, Tiri worked with his knife, expertly dissecting the head and gills of the shark. In the gullet he found a pulpy string of loin-cloth and then something that gently shimmered in the palm of his hand, rounded, perfect, silvery-white, with a faint suggestion of iridescence that would glow radiant under the sun or, beneath artificial lights, against the white skin of a beautiful woman. Tiri's teeth gleamed almost as brightly as he turned it with a forefinger, admiring its symmetry, then swiftly tucked it in his own *pareu*.

Something was coming up from the sea, rising on all fours from a receding wave. The shark had been hauled well up; but the flooding tide had brought the margin of the water within a few feet of it.

Tiri dropped like a dispelled shadow behind the body of the shark. He had been kneeling, and he did not believe that this man with the water in his eyes had noticed him. Now he crouched, his bent legs gathered under him, tense for a spring if the man was the one he wanted, the one he hoped for.

Back of the man, straightening himself while the withdrawing water swirled about his ankles, mounted the next incoming wave. Its crest was charged with the same flaming sea-stars, so that a greenish flame was reflected in the stream of the backwash.

The wave broke and thundered, and the man hurried to escape the undertow. He came over the hard sand to the body of the shark and peered over it, straight into the eyes of Tiri, before the latter leaped with a bloody knife that showed only a vague gleam.

Vaiki sprang back, then sidewise with the automatic agility of a cat, slipping free his own weapon. But he was in greater mood to run than fight. His heart was pounding; he felt himself predestined to defeat—to death.

"So," said Tiri. "You have come, you bastard. Now the name of Vaiki will go out with the soul of Vaiki, forgotten in the uttermost darkness."

He jumped over the shark, his left arm out on guard, expecting a thrust, expecting that Vaiki would squat as the other leaped and slash upward. But Vaiki veered and ran, refusing combat, his coward's soul in dismay. This landing by the shark, by the ambush of Tiri, was not to him a trick of the tide but magic, the magic of Tiri, who

had conjured him ashore by superior *mana*.

Vaiki raced swiftly over the hard, wet sand, faster than he had ever run, because he believed Death joined in the pursuit with Tiri. And Tiri, next to Oku, was the swiftest runner of Tahiti-Uni. Fast as Vaiki flew he heard the pad of feet behind him, gaining, gaining. Once he set his head on his shoulder and looked back. Tiri was running easily, too easily, with long strides from the hip; and Tiri laughed at him as he lengthened the stride.

The shaken will of Vaiki interfered with the best coordination of his body. He tripped, staggered, recovered himself and went on with his recreant heart pounding at his ribs and his lungs laboring. There was a pain in his side. He could have run better if he had supped; but Tiri had not eaten, and Tiri ran lightly as a Molokai deer.

A low promontory loomed up ahead, a dyke of lava rock. Vaiki shrank from attempting it. He would have to slow up; and the knife of Tiri, the avenger, would be plunged between his shoulder-blades.

He slowed up and heard that Tiri had spare breath enough to laugh again tauntingly. When Tiri was almost upon him Vaiki doubled like a hare and passed Tiri on the latter's left, shifting his knife, slashing out. Tiri laughed and parried, catching Vaiki's wrist with his left hand, flinging him down with a side trip.

"Get up, bastard," said Tiri. "Get up and fight."

Vaiki lay there on one arm, breathing, taking grace. The courage of a cornered rat came back to him. He made a sudden swipe at Tiri's ankles to sever a tendon, and Tiri jumped backward over the stroke.

"Get up," he said. "This is the knife of Oku. It has tasted blood, but it is still thirsty. It has spoken to my *aitu* (familiar spirit) and it has said that it must drink the blood of Vaiki, the bastard."

He gave Vaiki clear space, standing with arms hanging. Vaiki read his thoughts. Tiri did not want to strike a murderer's blow. His lust for blood would be satisfied only with the killing of Vaiki man to man.

And his supreme confidence leached away all remnants of Vaiki's. Tiri would boast of this avenging, he would make a song of it, to chant on the beaches of Tahiti-Uni, with Oku listening, Tatua by his side. For he was sure that Oku, or Tiri, had the pearl.

The strength had gone out of his legs; his knees would not support him; but at the thought of Oku triumphant a desperate sort of bravery came to him and he sprang up, circling about Tiri, crouching, waiting for an opening.

Tiri gave it to him, and he leaped in. Tiri's left fist struck his right elbow in paralyzing counter, his knife hand went high over Tiri's shoulder and the avenger stepped inside his guard. The knife of Oku went home. It hit Vaiki's breast-bone with a *skreek* and then sank deep, assuaging its thirst.

The two Tahitians, coming down to the beach after they had eaten, found Tiri by the shark. He showed them the loin-cloth of Oku, and he showed them the pearl that Oku had thrust deep in the gullet of the shark.

"It belongs to Oku," he said.

"It is the property of Oku," they agreed.

"We will send him back to Papeete with our wages," said Tiri. "Back to Tatua. We can get no price for the pearl in this place."

"It is agreed," they answered. "What of Vaiki?"

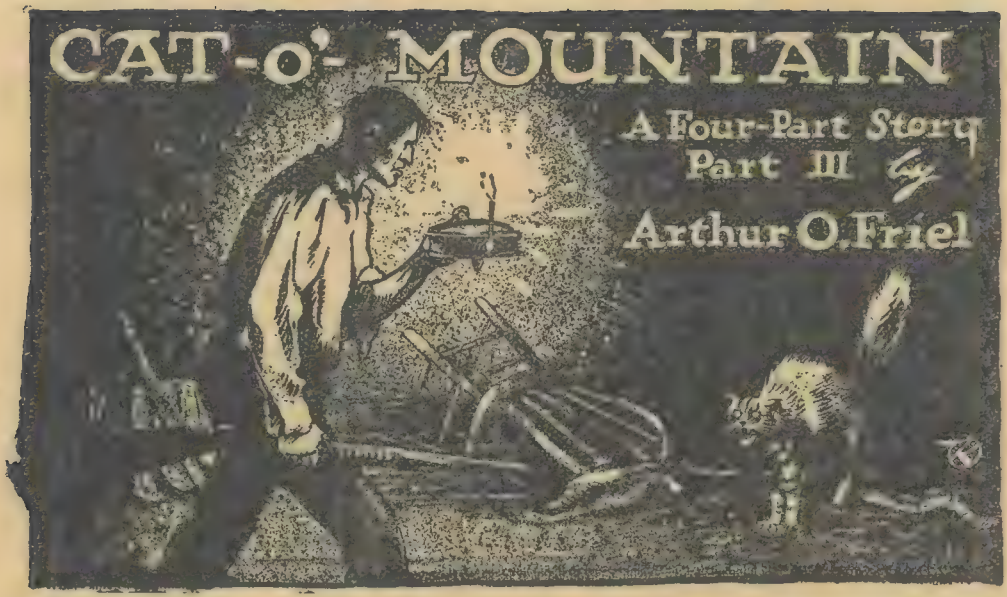
"The name of Vaiki is to be forgotten. It is better that we bury him. The tide may refuse him—and the sharks."

He took them to where the body of Vaiki lays, face down, with the surf lapping at his feet.

"I slew him with the knife of Oku," he said. "It is a good knife. Behold."

He gave a sharp twist to the carved handle, and it came apart, showing the cleverly concealed cavity where Oku had hidden the pearl, whence he had taken it when he dived.

Presently the three walked up the beach. The tide came in, with sea stars radiating in the shallows. It packed hard the grave of Vaiki and tugged at the butchered body of the *kai-kanaka*. Presently the ebb tugged at it and took it out to sea, where its roving fellows found an early breakfast.



Author of "Tupahn—the Thunderstorm," "Tiger River," etc.

The first part of the story briefly retold in story form

AT THE northern end of the Shawangunk Range lies a region where the Maker of Mountains went mad. It was named The Traps by the early settlers, and it is still called The Traps by the people who still occupy that desolate region.

There all strangers are looked upon with suspicion. Douglas Hampton, a newspaper man from the big city, found that no exception was made in his case.

One night the scream of a panther was followed by the cry of a frightened woman. Hampton's two-barreled shotgun eliminated the panther, and he found that the girl, Marion Oaks—"Nigger Nat's girl"—had sprained her ankle, making it impossible for her to reach home that night. Hampton doctored the ankle and watched over her for the remainder of the night in a near-by cave.

The following morning a young Trapsman named Steve came to the cave. He had escaped from the penitentiary and seemed to live only that he might be revenged upon "Snake" Sanders.

When Marion left to take Steve to a safe hiding-place she advised Hampton to make Jake Dalton's place his headquarters.

"Jake got kilt last Spring by something," she said. "You'll be safe there if Jake's ha'nt don't get you."

After Marion and Steve had left him Hampton felt a premonition of evil and, taking a small mirror from his pocket, held it so that it reflected the brush behind him. Soon he saw the head of a villainous appearing man rise above the rocks. Then a box appeared and a dirty hand lifted the lid. A large copperhead crawled out and toward Hampton; then it stopped—basking sluggishly in the sun.

A few minutes later Snake openly accosted Hampton, and, thinking Hampton a detective, offered to put him on the trail of any one he might be after.

Snake's attitude angered Hampton, and the two came to blows.

A hard, bloody fight ensued, the issue of which was for a long time in doubt, but Hampton was the one to walk triumphantly away.

On his way to Jake Dalton's place, Hampton passed a dingy house. Three vicious dogs rushed out, and their threats were backed up by a man—his brown face of a distinctly negro cast—who, sickle in hand, came forward on the run.

Just as things looked bad for Hampton an old man drove up, and, with his help, Hampton was able to defeat the dogs and their master—Nigger Nat.

Then Hampton climbed into the buggy, and the two men drove off.

When they came to Jake Dalton's place, the old man—Uncle Eb—tried to persuade Hampton not to stay there. Seeing that his protestations were in vain, he promised to bring Hampton provisions.

"I'll git jest what I'd buy for myself. Then if—if ye ain't here tomorrer, I can use it to home."

That night Jake Dalton's ha'nt lived up to its reputation; but Hampton was tired and he soon fell asleep. All at once, he found himself staring wide-eyed into the dark. Something moved. The bed was quivering slightly. Up in the attic there was a sound like that of bare heels going across the boards. Then *it* began to come down-stairs.

Very quietly Hampton lighted his lamp, gripped his gun and rose from the bed.

With a swift grab he turned the knob and opened the door. The stairway was utterly empty!

The next day Hampton was accosted by Lou, Snake Sanders' woman. She told him the legend of Ninety-Nine's silver mine.

"You'll find it," she said, "wher' the sun hits the wall fust into the morning."

At the advice of David McCafferty, Hampton went to Uncle Eb's house. The old man was being baited by two detectives who were hunting for Steve.

"Cat-o'-Mountain," copyright, 1923, by Arthur O. Friel.

Hampton bluffed the two men, Bill and Ward, and helped Steve to escape from his hiding-place.

When, later, the detectives molested Marion Oaks, intending to put her through a third degree, Hampton again interfered and knocked Bill down.

Marion's attitude to Hampton was decidedly cool and she refused to enter Uncle Eb's house with him, preferring to wait outside for Steve.

Before joining Marion, who was going to take him to her secret cave, Steve told Hampton how Snake Sanders had framed him; making it appear that he, Steve, had killed a man.

With the passing days the Trapmen ceased to regard Hampton suspiciously and he went his way unchallenged. Marion still avoided him and he decided to search for Ninety-Nine's silver mine.

Before setting out on his search, however, he fixed up some burlap bags on Jake Dalton's bed which, in a dim light, would resemble a blanketed form.

Dusk found him high up on the Wall.

At the same hour a form slipped out from the trees backing Dalton's house. It slid a piece of paper under the door. Then it ran away.

On the paper was written—

"For gord Sakes don't Sleep hear to Nite."

CHAPTER XVII

A STAB IN THE NIGHT

RAIN drizzled monotonously down on the Traps; cold, raw rain, swept slantwise by wind. Along Mohonk and the Great Wall crawled clammy fog, blinding all vision and chilling all flesh within its folds. Through rain and fog feebly penetrated the sickly light of a dismal dawn.

In the dankness and the dimness moved a bedraggled figure laden with a sodden blanket-pack and a dripping shotgun; a man whose blue lips and hollow eyes betokened a gnawing chill and scant sleep. Downward through dripping bushes he meandered uncertainly, avoiding steep slants of smooth rock on which his slippery boot-soles would inevitably precipitate him into disaster, and peering continuously about in search for a thin spot in the creeping cloud-bank. Only the unmistakable slant of the mountain-side told him which way he was heading—back into the Traps gulf which he had left on the previous day.

"A gorgeous sunrise—I guess so!" he grumbled. "Mister Jupiter Pluvius, this is a dirty low-down trick. And Mister Ninety-Nine, you can keep your mine till the crack of doom, for all I care. Go to thunder, both of you! I'm cured."

If the two old-timers whom he addressed were listening, they must have chortled in malicious mirth—especially the former. Catching this mortal asleep beside a dying fire, the rain-god had called up his soggy servitors in the night and let them wreak their will on the lone man—drowning his fire in the first drenching assault and then battering him right merrily. Without shelter, without light, he had been compelled to huddle up and endure it until dawn; and even now, though he was in motion once more, he had to shut his teeth to keep them from chattering.

From side to side he wormed along his erratic way, swinging from one ghostly bush-clump to another, ever following the rambling line of safe foot-holds, gradually descending toward the lower edge of the enshrouding mist. After a time the bare rock ended and he came into dense forest where the footing was secure. Down through this he passed with plunging strides. The rain ceased, and the wind died to a breath. Faster and faster he pressed on, warmer now, but eager to reach his house and dry out. Then suddenly he slowed.

Dead ahead opened a cleared space, and beyond, vague in the gray-white blur, were the faint outlines of a rough shack. Scanning the place as he moved on, he became sure that it was one which he had not seen in his previous wanderings. The exterior of the house was decidedly uninviting, but from its lopsided chimney smoke was drifting thinly away into the fog. His stride lengthened. Since the inhabitants of this house were up, he would stop there and ask for some hot coffee.

But the quick decision was as quickly reversed. As he neared the door it stealthily opened. Out stole Lou Brackett.

"Morning," he sang out, speeding up again. "Lovely day."

She started, turned her head, looked behind, advanced with hand uplifted for silence. He paused.

"Don't talk so loud," she implored as she reached him. "Snake, he's a-sleepin', but ye might waken him up. What ye want round here?"

"Nothing. Just going home. Been up above and got wet."

Smiling a little, he added—

"I wanted to see where the sun hit the wall first in the morning, but it isn't hitting today."

Into the black eyes came a sudden light. She laid a plump, not over-clean hand on his wet shoulder.

"Ye're a-huntin' the mine! I bet ye'll find it, too, if ye jest keep a-lookin' long 'nough. Ye ain't got nawthin' else to do—keep a-huntin'! An' when ye git to it 'member ye promised me some o' the silver. Will ye? An' don't tell nobody. Jest me an' you—we can git outen here together then."

The broad hint brought a tart retort to his tongue, but he swallowed it. Instead he asked:

"So you still want to leave? Why don't you go, then?"

She stared as if he had lost his senses.

"Go wher'? Go how? I ain't got no folks, mister—I ain't got no place to go—I ain't got no money—I ain't got nawthin'. I ain't never been nowheres—wha'd I do outside o' the Traps? An' Snake, he'd kill me sure's shootin', he would. 'Course, if I had some silver or somethin'—but I ain't got none. 'Less'n ye want to take me out with ye——"

"No, I don't," he broke in bluntly. "But you can get work in plenty of places outside where he never would bother you."

"I can't!" she disputed, drawing back. "Them that's borned into the Traps lives into the Traps an' dies into the Traps. Ther' ain't no place for us outside."

"All right. That doesn't match very well with what you said about leaving, but never mind. How did you and Snake make out that day about—er—the bridge?"

A slow smile spread across her face, revealing anew the gap in her teeth.

"Oh, we got 'long all right—I done what ye told me. He'd hearn 'bout it, but when he come at me I cracked him good with the sadiron an' jumped on to him 'bout them Oakses. It kinder took the tuck outen him. But—" her smile faded and her face turned hard "—that red-head o' Nat's better leave my man 'lone! Fust thing she knows I'll—wal, she better look out, tha's all!"

"What's that? Why, you're crazy! She hates the sight of him. Don't you start any trouble with her, or you'll be mighty sorry. And what's more, you can tell your man that unless he lets her alone he'll run into something hard—the same thing that hit him on Dickie Barre a while ago. She belongs to——"

The next word on his tongue was "Steve," with more words to follow. But his habitual avoidance of that name suddenly stopped his speech. She grinned sneeringly, interpreting his abrupt silence according to her lights.

"She does, hey? Then ye better take her into yer own house an' watch her. Me an' Snake don't git 'long none too well, but no red-headed catamount like her is a-goin' to git him. He was down ther' last night late, I know he was—he never tells me nawthin', but I ain't simple, an' I know. He come back 'way 'long late, an' he hadn't been a-drinkin', an' if he ain't drinkin' to Oaks's what's he a-doin' ther'? He's——"

All at once she turned hurriedly, as if sensing something in the house behind her. When she faced back she looked perturbed.

"I got to git in. He might waken up any time. G'by."

"All right. But you mind what I told you!"

Without reply, she padded hastily doorward. Frowning, he pushed away downhill. The door opened and softly closed, and the woman was gone. The mist sifted around the man, and he too was gone. And neither of them knew that Sanders, sleeping with one ear open, had started up at the sound of the intruder's first careless greeting and since then had watched snakily from the interior gloom.

He had heard nothing of what was said, for he was in his bedroom, behind a shut door and a closed window; and he had preferred to remain there, using his eyes rather than his ears, making no move. Furthermore, something about the appearance of that man in the ghostly fog had seemed to paralyze him for a moment when he first looked out. Then, recovering himself, he had watched the colloquy with the eyes of evil, interpreting it with the brain of evil. And now, though again in bed and apparently asleep when the woman Lou stealthily peeped in at him, he was mentally gliding along a black, black path—like a copperhead slithering through a sunless morass wherein moved nameless things.

Onward down the slope marched Douglas, scowling ahead at a well-marked path which his feet now were following but which his mind hardly noticed. The half-spoken threat of the woman behind against Marion Oaks bothered him. Primitive, ignorant,

unmoral, willing to abandon her "man" for a better one but jealous of any other woman who might attract him—there was no knowing what she might do in some vindictive rage. Douglas was not one of those men who look on all women as children and scoff at their dangerous moods; his newspaper experience had repeatedly brought him into contact with stark tragedies resulting from feminine jealousy; and he recalled the Indian cheekbones of Lou. Marion, he felt, should be warned.

But he shrank from the thought of delivering that warning himself. Not only was the rôle of tale-bearer utterly repugnant to him, but that wall of Pride loomed high and hard, as before. Moreover, the girl had repeatedly shown that she wished her acquaintance with him to remain unknown, had commanded him to remain away from Nigger Nat's house. What, then, should he do?

The problem solved itself. The mist thinned, then lifted a little, and he found himself nearing the road, only a short distance above the Oaks place. And when, striding along the road itself, he approached the house of Nigger Nat, he saw both Marion and her "mom" outside the door, apparently looking around for some one. To his astonishment, Eliza Oaks hailed him:

"Say! See anythin' o' my man anywheres?"

"Why, no. Lost him?"

He turned into the yard.

"I dunno. Ye didn't see him up the road nowheres?"

"Nope. But I haven't been up the road very far. Just came down across-lots."

Her gaze went over him, taking in his thorough wetness and the soggy blanket-pack. His eyes turned to the girl, who had drawn back a little and was steadfastly watching him. Over her thin dress she was wearing a ragged old coat, evidently the property of her father; and down the shoulders of the threadbare garment, unconfined by the few pins which generally held it up on her head, her hair cascaded in rippling glory. Meeting his eyes, her own contracted a little; but they held, unwavering. As swiftly as he had decided what to do for Steve that day at Uncle Eb's, he determined what to do for her.

"Am I correct in assuming that this is Miss Marion Oaks?" he asked formally, with the tiniest droop of the off-eyelid.

"You are," she answered with a cold dignity matching his own. "What of it?"

A subdued gurgle from the older woman drew his gaze to her. On her shrewish lips he found a sour smile.

"Ye needn't to be so awful perlite," she drawled. "Marry told me 'bout what ye done to that 'ere catamount, an' how ye made them fellers leave her 'lone onto the road, an' 'bout—wal, we're 'bliged to ye."

"Good! Glad you know we've met before, I mean—there's no obligation. Er—how does Nat feel about it?"

A scowl wiped off the thin smile. After a moment of silence she answered guardedly—

"He dunno nawthin' 'bout it."

"I see. You don't tell him all you know. Good idea, maybe. He's still sore at me, then. All right. Just keep him away from me and we won't have any trouble. I'm sorry I had to shoot up those dogs of yours, but——"

"Oh, 't's all right. I was mad then, but we're better off 'thout 'em—they et more'n they was wuth. An' mebbe ye done right to crack Nat when he come for ye. He don't mean no harm, Nat don't, but he—he's kind o' funny—he gits spells when he ain't his own self, like." She looked worriedly around again. "I wisht I knowed what's 'come o' him. He ain't been to home all night."

Douglas eyed her, remembering what Lou had said—that Snake had been here until late last night. But then, feeling that the jealous woman might be utterly mistaken in her statement, he kept his thought to himself. As for Nat, he probably was drunk somewhere. He turned to Marion.

"Miss Marion, I've heard something which I think you ought to know," he plunged. "Er—well, a certain woman up yonder thinks you and Snake Sanders are too friendly to suit her. It's absurd, of course, but still—folks get queer ideas, and sometimes they do queer things, and—maybe you'd better—er—keep your eyes open——"

He floundered to a stop, reddening under the steady, gray gaze, in which he read mounting scorn. Humiliated already by his position, he squirmed at her drawling answer.

"So that's where you've been to. Ain't Snake to home yet? You're takin' big chances, seems like. But that ain't anything to me. You needn't worry for me,

Mister Hampton—I can take pretty good care of my own self. But you can tell your friend, when you see her the next time, if she'll jest bust Snake's head so he won't never come to, I'll be much 'bliged."

Before he could retort, her mother's voice broke in:

"That 'ere Lou's a bigger fool 'n Snake, 'n' he's crazy 'nough. I ast him only yestiddy, says I: 'Ye mizzable idjit, how d'ye think ye'd ever git Marry when ye got Lou already? I've told ye time an' time to keep outen here——' "

She checked herself suddenly, as if regretting her outburst. The blond man's eyes were on hers again, boring like gimlets.

"So Snake was here last night," he said. "And where was Nat?"

"Nat—he was here—it war'n't last night —'twas in the aft'noon. Then they went away, an' Nat ain't back. I wisht I knowed——"

Once more she looked up and down the road.

"Snake's at home," he told her. "At least I was told he was, when I came by his place just now. Maybe Nat's there with him. I don't know. Well, good day."

Without another look at the girl he swung about. With his first step, however, Marion stopped him.

"Wait a minute," she said.

As he glanced at her he found another change in her attitude. She still stood with unconscious dignity, but the smoldering scorn had died from her eyes, and her face had softened.

"I want to say thank you for what you done that day on to the road—makin' that detective feller let go of me; and, more'n that, for helpin' out—you know who—up to Uncle Eb's. And you meant all right by tellin' me jest now to look out, I shouldn't wonder. So I say thank you for that too. G'by."

With that she was gone into the house. He opened his mouth, shut it, glanced at Eliza Oaks, saw a faint smile in her face, and laughed shortly. With a wave of his free hand he started off again, and kept going.

"What a wayward, fiery little thoroughbred!" he thought. "Quick as a cat—now you see her mind and now you don't. She made one awful fool of you, Hamp. Serves you right, too, confound you, with your tattling! But she thanked you, at that, like the real little lady she is. If she only had a chance to be somebody—if it weren't for the black blood—and Steve—Lordy, what a woman she'd make!"

The thought kept revolving in his mind until he entered the fallow little field beside his bleak abode. Then it fled.

His front door was open.

Instinctively he slowed. His searching scrutiny revealed no other change in the house. Only that door, which he had made to fit tightly by tacking on strips, stood as if shoved back by a hurried entrance—or departure.

"Wind?" he debated. "Wind blew last night, but not hard. Hm! How come?"

Approaching guardedly, he peered within. Nobody was there. Nothing seemed altered. The place not only looked empty—it felt empty.

But before stepping over the threshold he shoved the door hard with one foot. It swung back and struck the wall, proving that nothing waited behind it. Entering, he shot a glance into the bedroom where lay the forgotten dummy of burlap. For a second he stood rigid. Then he leaped into the room.

The dummy still lay there. But it had been visited in the night. The visitor had left a memento of his call. Its handle jutted horizontally from the huddled sacks.

Douglas grasped that handle and drew upward. From the burlap and the corn-husk mattress beneath slid a long blade. Grimly he inspected it. When he turned toward the outer room his face was flint.

He had seen that murderous tool before. It was the corn-hook of Nigger Nat Oaks.

CHAPTER XVIII

HUNTERS OF MEN

MOVING rapidly about, Douglas inspected his real bedroom and the spidery attic, finding his bough-tip couch undisturbed and the upper room empty. Back in the main room, he glowered anew at the bayonet-like blade which had been driven with such venomous force into what seemed to be a sleeping man.

"This cooks your goose, Nat Oaks!" he growled. "You've let yourself in for the worst mauling you ever got in your low-down life. Just as soon as you and I meet up again—and we'll meet just as quick as I can find you!"

He strode to the door. But there he slowed, stayed by the reflection that Nigger Nat was not likely to be at home now and that he did not know where else to look. "Better build a fire, eat, and dry out," whispered Common Sense. So he slammed the door shut and returned to the cold stove.

With the kindlings in position, he reached to the little shelf above him for a dry match —and knocked the match-box to the floor. Stooping to pick up the little igniters, he saw under the stove a scrap of paper. Mechanically he lifted it, glanced at it, saw only a blank space; folded it once, touched a match to it, and held it under the grate to start the fire. It blazed out bravely, the light of its own flame shining through it.

Suddenly he snatched it back and killed its blaze under a wet sole. The light had revealed writing inside the little sheet.

Straightening out the charred, muddy remnant, he read—

——akes dont Sleep hear to Nite.

Minutes passed while he squatted there, his whole mind concentrated on that belated message. Then he turned, inspected the floor, looked back at the stove, and nodded.

"Somebody slid this under the door yesterday after I left," he deduced. "When the door opened later on, the wind blew it here, wrong side up. Now who left it? Not Lou Brackett—not Marry or her mother—they don't know a thing about this. Uncle Eb? Steve? Not likely that they'd know what was to happen. And it surely wasn't either of those man-hunters. Hm! Some one of these silent Trapsmen who likes me, maybe. Well, my unknown friend, I'm obliged to you. Call again some time."

Again he studied the writing, the spelling, the paper—cheap wrapping, wrinkled and soiled.

"You haven't much education and you write like a coal-heaver, but your heart's true blue," he added, folding the blackened tatter and pocketing it. "I'd surely like to know who you are. But if you're as close-mouthed as everybody else around here you'd never admit that you wrote this, anyway. Well, let's start this fire."

Soon a hot fire was roaring up-chimney, coffee was coming to a boil, and he was arraying himself in the few dry articles of clothing he could find, while the wet garments and boots encircled the stove. After a rough-and-ready breakfast he hugged the stove himself, smoking and thinking.

Nat Oaks was a clumsy murderer indeed to leave his weapon behind. Perhaps the ha'nt had scared him—the open door indicated a sudden bolt from the place. For that matter, it was strange that he had ever dared to enter this house of fear at night. He must have been full of "Dutch courage" at the time.

But there was Snake Sanders, too. Snake had been with Nat when he left home yesterday afternoon. He had returned to his own den late at night. And he was a creature who always worked stealthily, snakily, using others as his tools. In avenging his real or fancied grudge against the Bumps he had used Steve as his scapegoat. In trying to rid the neighborhood of the "detective" and gain possession of the stranger's belongings he had employed a deadly reptile. Now he and Nigger Nat had been much together of late—and he had "some kind of a hold" on Nat. So Marion had said. It was fair to suspect, then, that he had been the instigator of this murderous attempt last night. Yes, very fair. Almost a foregone conclusion.

Yet there was no actual proof of Snake's hand in this. For that matter, the proof against Nat himself was purely circumstantial. Another hand might have wielded this corn-hook. It was even possible that the corn-hook itself was not Nat's, though it looked the same. Corn-hooks probably were much alike. True, this one had a whitish gouge on the handle near the blade, and the same sort of mark had been noticeable at the same spot when Nat had poised it for attack that day in his yard. But still——

"First thing I'll do, Nigger Nat, will be to find out whether this hook is yours," declared the man by the stove. "If it is, the next thing is to get hold of you. Then I'll hammer the truth out of you."

In pursuance of this program, he stoked up the fire and hastened the drying of the necessary articles of outdoor gear. When at length his personal outfit was again serviceable he went forth into the raw day.

But he did not start away at once. Memory persisted in reminding him of Uncle Eb's account of the open door and of what he had found in the woods behind

the house. He rubbed his chin, then turned and stalked toward those woods.

In under the funereal trees he passed, scrutinizing the vague dark things here and there among the trunks, finding them to be only rotting fragments of old logs, half-buried juts of stone, or lumps of forest mould. No sound came to him but the tiny impacts of falling leaves and the watery squash of his own boots on the soaked soil. Dreary and dismal stood the forest, telling him nothing of what had taken place last night. His only reward for his wandering there was a renewal of his wetness.

Swinging back, he worked by the driest route toward the road, thinking only of settling the matter of the ownership of the corn-hook. And now that he sought nothing, he found something: A grim reminder of what had come about within these shades on another night.

Under a hemlock was a sinister low mound. At one end stood a short pine board. On the board he deciphered scrawling letters shallowly cut with a jackknife.

JAKE
DALTON

Though he had repeatedly visited these woods before, seeking fuel, he never had stumbled on this spot. Now he stood gazing thoughtfully down, hearing again Uncle Eb's words:

"What he was runnin' away from—what had got holt o' him before he run—nobody knows. Nobody but Jake, an' he can't tell."

And last night another man had bolted from the same house, from the same room—whither? Why? Douglas felt a slight chill. With a sharp shake of the shoulders he lifted his head and right-faced. Out to the silent clearing he tramped, and straight up the road.

On his way to the Oaks place he met nobody. The only tracks not blurred by rain on the sand were his own, made that morning. Entering the yard of Nigger Nat, he slowed down, sharply scanning the windows. No face showed there.

"Hey! Hullo!" he called.

After a pause the door opened. Marion's head came out.

"Hullo yourself! What you want? Seen pop anywheres?"

"No. He hasn't come home yet?"

"If he had I wouldn't be askin', would I?"

"Probably not. Well, I wonder if I can borrow his corn-hook awhile."

"Corn-hook? Why—yes, I guess so. He wouldn't like it much, but— Mom, Mister Hampton wants pop's corn-hook awhile. All right? Wait a minute and I'll git it."

She withdrew, leaving the door partly open. Presently her voice floated to him from somewhere at the rear.

"'Tain't here! Mom, you been usin' it? Well, 'tain't here. What's 'come of it, I wonder?"

Hammerless Hampton's face tightened. To the door he passed, drawing from under his coat the tool which, despite its clumsiness, he had managed to conceal.

"Maybe this is it," he called.

Feet padded inside, and both the girl and her mother appeared.

"Sakes alive! That's it, now!" ejaculated the woman. "It's his'n—got the two nicks into the edge that he never ground outen it, an' there's the place where one o' the dawgs bit onto it." She pointed to dull dents on the handle. "How come ye by it?" she added suspiciously. "What ye askin' for it for, when ye got it already?"

"Just wanted to make sure it was his. I found it down the road a piece—in some corn-husks."

He watched her keenly. Her visage showed only blank wonderment. The girl, too, looked mystified, but she was probing his grim face with sharp eyes.

"An'—ye didn't see nawthin' o' Nat?"

"Not a thing. But you can tell him, when he gets home, that I want to see him, and the best thing he can do is to wait for me."

Without another word or look he swung away, leaving them staring after him in misgiving. On up the road he journeyed, turning off at the road leading to the lair of Snake Sanders.

The crawling mists had long since left the slopes, and when he emerged again into the Sanders field the shack was visible in all its raw nakedness. Smoke still curled from its shiftless chimney, but the only sign of life outside was a lonesome speckled hen picking disconsolately at the bare dirt. Watching the windows, he marched up to the door and give it a resounding kick. Then he jumped to one side.

A chair fell over within, followed by hurried steps.

"Who's ther'?" shrilled a sharp voice.

"Open up!" he snapped, warily sweeping the front of the place, from corner to corner. "I want Snake!"

More steps. The door swung slowly back. Lou Brackett's face appeared, drawn into a squinting knot.

"Send Snake out here!" he commanded.

She eyed him, unspeaking, for a long minute. Gradually her face relaxed. She came forward and stood on the door-stone. Her right hand was gripping a heavy flatiron.

"Snake, he ain't here."

"Where is he? I want him."

"I dunno wher' he's at. He went out 'while ago—never said one word to me after he got up, 'cept tellin' me to git more cawffee. What's pesterin' ye? Wha' for d'ye come a-kickin' into the door——"

"Nat Oaks here?"

"Nat! No, mister, that yeller dawg ain't! Him nor none o' his tribe—now or no other time! What ye——"

"All right. Good-by."

Leaving her open-mouthed, he circuited the house, looking in at every window, finding that she spoke truthfully: neither Sanders nor Oaks was there. She still stood on the steps, gaping after him, when he went back across the opening and disappeared down-hill among the trees.

At the edge of the sandy road below he paused, undecided what to do next. Had he been in almost any other place and seeking a man, he would have visited other men and asked questions. But here in the tight-mouthed Traps, what was the use? Still, he felt a strong distaste for returning and idling out the dismal day in his dreary abode. Half-consciously he turned toward Uncle Eb's home.

"I'll go up and smoke a pipe with the old man, anyhow," he decided aloud.

"Smoke it here if you want," a voice answered.

The voice came from beside a tree not ten feet away. Startled, he looked into the face of Ward, man-hunter.

"Caught you flat-footed, huh?" Ward went on. "Bill's behind you, if that's what you're lookin' for."

True enough, a few feet back from the other side of the path, the morose face of Bill showed beside another tree.

"Well! You fellows are getting good!" Douglas congratulated them. "Regular Indian stuff. You'd have had me cold if you'd wanted me."

"Sure." Ward nodded carelessly. "But we don't want you—not yet."

"Not yet? Meaning what?"

"Oh, we ain't got anything on you—yet. When we do we'll nail you. Right now we got other work."

"Thanks! Mighty nice of you to tell me. How are you making out?"

"Bum luck, so far," was the frank admission. "But we'll git what we're after. You could help us if you would, but it's no good askin' you."

Douglas grinned jauntily. Then he grew sober. There was something about the patient, straightforward, quiet-spoken Ward that appealed strongly to him, just as there was a coarseness about "Brooklyn Bill" that aroused his reckless antagonism. Too, he himself was now a man-hunter on his own account. With Bill silent behind him and Ward's steady eyes before him, he felt a sudden swerve from the Traps current in which he had been drifting. Weighing his words, he spoke out.

"See here, Ward. You haven't told me who your man is, and I'm not asking. Maybe I know something about the case, maybe I don't. But let's suppose a case.

"Suppose you're looking for a fellow—only a young lad—who got sent up for arson and a few other things like that. Suppose I have reason to believe that the young fellow never did what he was sent up for; that he has served years for a crime he never committed; that he was 'framed.' Would you blame me for not wanting to help send him back to a good many more years of the same?"

Ward's eyes widened a trifle.

"No, I wouldn't. I'd feel sorry for him myself. But 'framed'? How?"

"Used as a goat by an older man. Filled up with liquor and left to take the blame for burning a house and shooting people, while the man who really did it sneaked back up here and laughed at you fellows. That could easily be done."

A pause, while Ward watched him steadily.

"Sure, it could be done. But to git the kid clear it would have to be proved. Who's the man?"

Douglas glanced behind him—up Snake Sanders' road. The movement was involuntary, prompted by an instinct to make

sure that nobody else was lurking and listening. But Ward's shrewd eyes narrowed, and he nodded as if in complete understanding.

"I'm not saying," Douglas replied, facing him again. "We're just supposing, of course. But in that case, you couldn't expect much help from me, even if I knew where the youngster was. As a matter of fact—if you are looking for such a fellow—I don't know where he is. But, speaking of goats, here's something that's not 'supposing' at all: While I was away last night somebody entered my house and rammed a foot and a half of cold steel into a dummy I'd left in my bed. And I'm pretty sure that the mind back of that stab—though maybe not the hand that did the stabbing—was the same one that framed up that 'supposed' boy we're talking about."

Another pause.

"Uh-huh. And you've been up here to see about it, and your man wasn't home. Well, we're waitin' for that same gentleman; been wantin' to see him for quite a while, but he's a slippery cuss. When we do git hold of him—we've got a few questions to ask him. Glad you spoke that little piece of yours, Hampton. We'll keep it in mind."

"All right. If I see him before you do he may get mussed up considerably, so you'd better grab him soon. So long."

"Wait a minute. Got any idea who swung that steel on the dummy—if it wasn't the same gent?"

"Oh, yes. But that's my business. So long."

"So long. Watch yourself."

Douglas tramped away. Ward and Bill looked at each other, slid back behind their trees, and resumed their silent waiting.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SUN BREAKS THROUGH

THREE days of raw chill, leaden cloud, and numbing wind rolled past. No more rain fell, but, except by fitful gleams, no sun shone. Through each gray day the dying leaves fluttered limply down, carpeting the damp ground thicker and thicker with yellow and crimson and brown. Through each black night a few hardy survivors of the former myriad of katydids quacked despairingly, and here and there a cricket sounded a mournful call to comrades which no longer answered him. Bleak November was drawing near.

In those gray days Hammerless Hampton ranged the roads, the fields, and the forest, implacably hunting the man or men who had struck in the dark at the lay figure representing himself. Time and again he visited the Oaks house and the Sanders shack. But never did he find his quarry there. Time and again he was asked, with suspicion verging on anger, why he kept "a-pesterin' round." But he never told.

The manner of both Nigger Nat's woman and Snake Sanders' woman became sullenly hostile. Yet, though their attitude toward him was basically the same, there was a difference. In the shrewish face and the snappish answers of the former was revealed worriment for the missing man. In the lowering countenance and the dogged replies of the latter was clumsy untruth. The man who studied them both knew that Snake, though always absent when he came, was present at certain other times; while Nat had never come home.

Of Marion he saw little. When he did see her it was at her own door, and few words passed between them. He knew, though, that her active brain was surmising more or less accurately why he was hunting her father, and in her sober face he saw grave concern. But the rankling irritation of the other two women was never visible in her voice or manner. Whether her sympathies were with him or with her own kin he did not know.

He did not confine his questioning, however, to these three. Though he felt it to be useless—and, indeed, found it so—to ask any of the clansmen for information regarding the two whom he sought, he quizzed every man he met. The only result was to cause keen interest in his movements and to spread throughout the mountain bowl the word that he was "a-huntin' Nat an' Snake with blood into his eye."

Even Uncle Eb gave him no aid. But this time it was not clannishness nor habitual taciturnity regarding his neighbors that made fruitless the younger man's call on him. He really knew nothing of either of the rascally pair.

"Nor I don't want to," he added bluntly. "If ther's anybody into the world I don't want to know nawthin' 'bout, it's them

fellers. No, I take that back, now I think onto it. Ther's one thing I'd like awful well to know 'bout 'em—that they was both dead. But that's too good to come true."

The old man was standing in his doorway at the time, and his manner was even more jerky than usual. Douglas, outside, was conscious of the frank scrutiny of two women at a near-by window—Uncle Eb's wife and spinster daughter, both intelligent-looking but decidedly plain of feature. Uncle Eb, too, seemed aware of listening ears, for he left his stoop and walked to the road, out of hearing. He asked no question, but his move was an obvious invitation to tell why Nat and Snake were wanted. And, briefly, Douglas did.

"The varmints!" Eb muttered fiercely. "The murderin' snakes! They'd oughter be shot! Only for ye bein' away they'd got ye. They're a-layin' low now 'cause they know ye're a-trackin' 'em. By mighty, boy, ye must have a good angel a-watchin' out for ye, sendin' ye out that day an' all! Ye'd oughter change yer bed now—mebbe change yer house too. I ain't soop'stitious, but ther' ain't no good luck into that house o' Jake's."

Douglas wavered, half-minded to tell him of his previous change in sleeping quarters and of the mysterious missive of warning. But he held his tongue. Such disclosures would do no good. Instead, he shifted the subject.

"Maybe so, but I'm not moving out yet. By the way, I saw those two detectives the other day. They say they'll get what they're after."

Uncle Eb scowled. After a glance around he whispered:

"Son, I'm right worried. This is turrible weather for that boy to lay up into the rocks. He ain't tough now—he was into the pen three year, ye know, an' that weakens a feller—specially us hill fellers that's used to lots o' air. I dasn't bring him back down here—I dasn't go nigh him—for fear them detectives'll git to him; they been round here two-three times, a-watchin' an' a-layin' low. But I wisht he could git under cover some'rs. I hear he's got a misery onto his chest already."

The younger man frowned in concern. Comfortably clad though he was, he felt the raw bite of the air; his ungloved fingers, in fact, were partly numbed. And Steve, cowering among those clammy boulders, unable to risk a fire—why, the boy was barefoot!

"D'ye s'pose, now, ye could toll them fellers out o' the Traps for good?" Eb suggested hopefully. "Ye fooled 'em deef, dumb an' blind that time they was right onto his back. Mebbe ye could——"

He paused. Douglas reluctantly shook his head.

"Afraid not. They know now that I'm on Steve's side. It wouldn't work. But—I'll see if I can think of something."

Dubious as the answer was, Eb's face showed some relief.

"Do that, son! Think o' sumpthin'—anythin'—an' then go do it. I been a-thinkin' till I'm all jumpy-like, an' it don't git me nowheres. Mebbe I'd oughter let him shift for hisself, seein' he ain't no relation o' mine, but I can't keep my mind offen the boy. He was borned unlucky, ye might say, an' he never had much of a chance, an'—I'm right sorry for him."

"Born unlucky? How do you mean?"

Uncle Eb glanced sidewise at him; pulled at one end of his walrus mustache; spat loudly, looked at his windows, and spoke—but did not answer.

"I got to be gittin' in. I'm a-gittin' cold. Uh—do what ye can for the pore feller. G'by."

Hastily he lumbered houseward. Douglas stared, laughed shortly at the awkward rebuff, and sauntered away, unoffended. He knew the old man's tongue had been clutched by the hand of habit—the habit of telling no tales about others; and, in a way, he honored the old fellow for it. What mattered Steve's birth, anyway? The real crux was the problem of his immediate future.

All the way back to his abiding-place that problem bothered him. Night was not far off now, and the cold was increasing. Looking up at the chill gray cliffs of Dickie Barre as he passed along the road, he shivered. What a cheerless refuge for a half-clad boy! Skulking there alone in a black hole night after night, numbly waiting day after day, subsisting on cold food smuggled to him by stealth, dreading every sound, with a growing "misery onto his chest"—he was in a worse prison than the one from which he had escaped. Beside him, its grisly fingers perhaps already touching his lungs, lurked the dread specter of the hills—pneumonia.

And he, Hampton, though he lived in a haunted house, had shelter and stove and warmth—and more room than he needed. All at once he nodded sharply. He knew what he would do.

Before night set in he worked a little while at his back door, which opened hard and creaked loudly. With his camp-ax he trimmed its edges, and with gun-oil he lubricated the rusty hinges, until it would swing easily and silently. After barring it he turned to the window of his sleeping-room, which hitherto had been wedged so that it would admit fresh air but nothing else. On this also he labored for a time. When it would rise with smooth speed he locked it with a short stake and turned his attention to preparing supper.

"Maybe tomorrow night we'll have company," he informed the emptiness. "Maybe."

An hour later he was asleep on his aromatic couch, and the whole house was given up to darkness and silence.

As the black hours wore on, the boards above his head dully gave notice that the ha'nt was prowling back and forth on its softly thumping bare heels. Perhaps his subconscious self knew of the movement, but it did not arouse his sleeping senses—it was only the usual nightly occurrence. Out in the main room beyond his closed door, too, something moved about: a silent, hideous, unhuman thing which paused awhile beside the wooden barrier, then glided elsewhere; a thing which opened no doors or windows, which neither entered the house nor left it, but which presently was gone. Of this, too, he knew nothing.

The weird sough of the sepulchral pines behind the house, the proximity of the mound holding all that was left of the man who had been done to death here, the steel-slashed rent in the corn-husk mattress beyond the wall—none of these things troubled him. Tranquilly he slept until morning light smote softly on his lids and woke him to a new day.

Sun and warmth flooded the Traps when, after breakfast, he emerged into the air. After the grayness and the numbness of the past few days, the change was magical. But for the thinly clad branches above and the sodden wind-blown leaves below, it would have seemed mid-August instead of late October. In the hot air flies buzzed, bees hummed, and a resounding chorus throbbed from crickets and katydids defiantly informing the world that they were not yet dead. And from all sides drifted the damp fragrance of forest mould and of grass-ground drying in the heat.

But, as a wandering breeze floated from the region of a bush-bound little brook beyond the road, it bore into the pleasant aroma of plant life a vague taint.

Douglas, inhaling the freshness of the morning, half-sensed that slight odor and glanced around. But then the breeze died and he forgot it. Drawing another great lungful of air, he struck off up the road toward the Oaks place.

Before he reached it the sound of chopping came to him. As he entered the yard he found a figure slugging away at a chopping-block with an ax which seemed dull. It wore a man's hat, but it also wore a dress. That hat fell off as he approached, and the sun glowed red in the tumbled hair suddenly revealed. At the sound of his step the girl wheeled sharply and, panting and flushed, looked at him.

"No, he ain't home," she said before he could speak. "You can run right 'long up to Lou's."

She turned from him, picked up another stick of fire-wood, swung the ax dexterously, and split the fagot clean. Something about her words and manner gave him a sudden glimpse of her side of that pride-wall which had stood between them: the side which he had supposed to bear the face of Steve, but which now seemed to hold something else. He stepped forward and closed one hand over the ax-helve.

"Look here, Marion," he said quietly, "I don't like that."

"'Tain't much to me what you like," she retorted, though with little heat. "Jest travel 'long."

"When I'm ready." He kept his grip on the handle. "But let's settle this now. You've been acting offish for quite a while—ever since the day we talked about art and—and so on, up the brook. I've been too bull-headed to ask you why. But I'm asking you now, straight and square; and asking you, too, why you keep intimating that Lou is a particular friend of mine. Now speak up, man to man."

With steady directness she looked up at him. Wide gray eye and clear blue eye searched each other to the depths. And

then, man to man, straight from the shoulder, she spoke out.

"I heard 'bout you huggin' her under the bridge. 'Tain't any of my business, only—"

"What's that? *Hugging?*"

"Yes, sir, huggin'. And pretty hard, too. And that wasn't much more'n an hour after—after—" she flushed crimson—"after you—made me—fight to git my picture. The only difference it makes to me is this: You couldn't have much respect for yourself to do it, or for me either. 'Course, I'm only Nigger Nat's girl, and folks ain't got much respect for him or anybody of his, but—but that's different."

"I should think so!" he agreed crisply. "Those dirty little gossips who spied us made a fine tale of it, didn't they! Well, now, here's the exact truth."

And the exact truth of that incident he gave her. He omitted only to tell of the woman's clumsy attempt to lure him and of her appeal for silver from the lost mine; and these parts he left out only because of innate chivalry toward even such drab womanhood as Lou's.

"So that's all there is to it," he concluded. "I tried to help her out but only got her into a worse mess, thanks to lying tongues. Now you can believe me or those kids, just as you like."

A little longer the gray eyes held his. Then they fell, and on her lips dawned the first smile he had seen there in many a long day.

"I'm—I'm glad you come visitin' this mornin', even if you are mad at my pop," she said softly. "But have we both got to keep holdin' this ax?"

"No," he smiled. "I can hold it alone. Let go."

She obeyed.

"Now I didn't come hunting your pop today," he went on, "although I'm on the lookout for him all the time, and— Tell me, do you care much about your pop?"

"Well, he's the onliest pop I've got," she naively reminded him. "But I don't care much about him. He's awful or'n'ry."

"Quite right. He's all of that. But we'll forget him for now. I came over today to ask you to take me to—a friend of ours." She looked up quickly. "Uncle Eb tells me he's sick, and I want to see him. Will you guide me?"

Dubiously she looked all about. Her whispered reply was hardly audible.

"We've got to go careful. The detective fellers, they're a-watchin' all round—mebbe they're up into some of these trees right now. But—can you help him some way?"

"I'm going to try."

"All right, we'll go. Cut me a little more wood while I take this into the house. Mom, she's abed yet; she don't feel good this mornin'. But she ain't real sick. We'll go pretty quick."

With another smile at him she gathered up wood and hastened in. And Hammerless Hampton set his gun against the wall and looked around, marveling at the brightness of the sun and the sweetness of the air and the cheeriness of the birds. Even the harsh cries of the bluejays in the woods sounded musical. In all the Traps at that moment he could find not one discordant note of sound or color. Indeed, something disagreeable seemed magically to have vanished from the world, and it was good to be alive.

And something had vanished: something nebulous, intangible, yet real and rock-hard: the two-sided wall of Pride. And Douglas, feeling that all was well with the universe, began lustily swinging the ax in the service of the girl who was glad he had come visiting.

CHAPTER XX

LIBERTY OR DEATH

ALONG a dim, winding trail, through baffling undergrowth and around half-buried blocks of stone and over prostrate tree-trunks, a man and a maid passed in silence. Under foot the damp leaves, not yet dried by sun or wind, gave out no betraying crackle. The pair spoke no word, made hardly a rustle as they touched bare stems or twigs. They seemed bound on an all-day hunting trip, for the man carried a shotgun, and the girl a little apron knotted into a bag, containing food. Yet it was the girl who led the way.

Upward, ever upward they climbed on a slope whose pitch grew more and more steep. At length they paused at the edge of a gigantic mass of boulders, above which towered stark crags split by a yard-wide fissure.

"We go up into that crack, then 'long the top of the ledge to the left, then down again," Marion breathed.

"Why?" he remonstrated. "Why not work along here without going up and down?"

"You ain't much of a detective if you can't guess that," she laughed. "Up on top we can watch back and see if we're followed. Down here we can't."

"Quite right," he conceded. "You're a better dodger than I am. A better climber, too, probably. These boots don't grip bare rock very well."

"Go 'long, and go slow. Don't bump and scrape. We've got all day."

After surveying the jumble above, he began working up into it, moving with caution but with creditable speed. For a time he was so engrossed with the toil of quietly moving himself, his damp-soled boots, and his gun, that he gave no attention to her. When at length he paused at the foot of the fissure he looked back—and found her close at his heels.

"You're awful slow and stiff," she taunted, as if she had not just warned him to proceed cautiously. "I'll go 'long up and wait. G'by."

And up she went with a flash of white ankles and a swirl of swaying skirt, her toes gripping with unerring surety at the soil slanting down within the crevice, her lithe young body swinging with easy grace, her hair flaming like an up-shooting meteor. At the top she swung and laughed once more with the exhilaration of strenuous activity. Then she moved from sight.

"Whew!" breathed Douglas, contemplating the slope. "Our catamount can climb! Imagine a corseted, high-heeled city girl doing that. Imagine *me* doing that! If I don't come flopping back down here end-over-end I'll be lucky. Well, here goes."

Digging in his toes, he started. For a few feet all went well. Then his soles began to slip, and only a clutch with his free hand stopped his slide. By the time he was half-way up he was clambering crab-wise, forcing in his heels. And when he neared the top he was using every support he had—feet, hands and gun-butt. However, he made the ascent without a fall; and, thanks to his recent days of roving, without much loss of wind.

Marion had disappeared, but the little bundle of food lay beside the cleft. Presently she came creeping back on hands and knees from the outer brink and stood erect.

"Well, Mister Slowpoke, you got here before noon after all," she gibed. "I 'most went to sleep waitin', the sun's so hot out yender. There ain't any detectives into sight, so when you git rested we can travel 'long."

"Rested? I'm not so feeble as you think," he smiled. "And just remember that I have to lift about seventy or eighty more pounds of bone and meat at every step than you do. You're only a flyweight. Bet I can lift you with one arm."

"Bet you can't!" she flashed.

Forthwith he laid down his gun and swept her off her feet. Steadying her with the right hand lightly laid against her shoulders, he raised her on his rigid left forearm. She wriggled, slipped, and instinctively seized him around the neck. Both his arms suddenly tightened around her. Her face came close to his.

The next instant a firm little hand set itself against his chin. Though his grip still held her, her face now was more than a foot away. The slender arm between them was like a steel bar.

"Let go!" she commanded.

"What's the matter? Afraid I'll kiss you?" His eyes were dancing recklessly. "Or are you afraid I won't?"

"Afraid — you — won't? That's 'bout 'nough! You ain't under a bridge now!"

The twit stung. His face darkened. He set her down abruptly, picked up his gun, moved away toward the left.

"I—I didn't mean that," she quickly added. "I dunno why I said it—it jest come, like. But—remember, we come up here to see somebody."

He nodded somberly and strode on. Confound it! Why did these hill-girls take things so seriously? He hadn't meant to kiss her anyhow. Or had he? He didn't know; maybe, in that momentary devil-may-care mood, he would have done it. And what if he had? There was nothing fatal about a careless kiss or so, all in fun. But then, there was Steve, of course. Yes, that was it. That fierce, vengeful, desperate boy—she was cleaving to him, one of her own people, and the kiss of any other man was not to be lightly taken. So be it. She was right enough, of course.

Yet, in his unintrospective way, he felt a vague irritation over the eternal presence of Steve. If only the youth did not exist—He let the thought go no farther. He did

not consider what might be if Steve were removed. Neither did he recall that this girl's blood was tainted by her parentage. He let the whole matter die, and instead put his mind on the lonely, sick boy himself, victim of Snake Sanders' machinations and fugitive from the insensate monster which killed men's souls—the Law. Sympathy for him again warmed his heart. He pressed on in his errand of aid.

"D'you shave every day?" sounded a small voice at his heels.

"Uh? Shave?" He groped, bewildered by the sudden change of thought. "Why—yes. Every morning after breakfast. Why?"

"Your chin's so smooth. It ain't all full of splinters like pop's. And your face always looks so clean. I never see any other man that kept his face clean every day. I—I kind of like it."

The ingenuous statement made him laugh.

"Glad there's something about me that you like," he mocked. "But to me it's not so much a matter of appearance as of comfort. I can't stand a mess of bristles on my face and throat. It's prickly. So I slice it off."

They trudged on, following a faintly defined path well back from the brink, invisible to any eye which might look up from below. After awhile she said softly, as if talking to herself—

"Steve's gittin' awful whiskers onto his face."

Remembering the bristly black beard he had noticed on the fugitive's unshaven face at their last meeting, he nodded carelessly.

"Of course. How can he shave?" he reminded her. "But maybe he can clean it off soon. We'll see."

"What you figgerin' to do?"

"Ask him to come down and hide in my house, where he'll be dry and warm."

She gave a little gasp.

"Why—why, he can't! With them detectives pesterin' round—if they should come he'd be caught into a reg'lar trap. And you'd git 'rested too."

"Maybe. But it's getting too cold for him to lie up here. Today's hot, but tomorrow—He's got to move somewhere soon."

Soberly she studied him.

"That's so, but he won't come, I don't b'lieve. I tried to git him to come down and stay to our house, but he wouldn't. He dasn't trust pop. And them detectives, they watch everywheres. They come there one time and asked pop a lot of questions. I dunno what they asked him—I wasn't round; but pop's apt to say 'most anything or do 'most anything—depends on how drunk he is."

"Steve's wise not to go there, then. But it's different at my place."

No more was said. Marion looked often at him as they journeyed on, and her face was troubled. He kept his forward-ranging gaze on the vague path.

After a time he found himself emerging at the brink. Here she resumed the lead. Down over a jagged confusion of leaning boulders she picked a tortuous way, followed by the more slowly moving man. Presently they were under the cliff, amid thick brush, on steep but firm-soiled ground whence protruded a few deep-sunk blocks. She moved a rod or two to the left and paused.

"See anything?" she questioned.

He studied the surroundings and shook his head. In the blank face of the precipice showed no opening—not even a crack. The cliff, the ground, the brush, the half-dozen juts of gray stone—there was no sign of a hiding-place. True, there were two fair-sized boulder-tops close together, with a small black hole between; but the hole must be only a cranny in the earth, like hundreds of others along the wall—a good place to break a leg, but not to hide in. He did not give it a second glance.

Yet it was at this despised hole that she knelt. Into it her head vanished, and from it sounded her signal—a soft "Hoo-hoo" almost inaudible above ground. From somewhere down in the bowels of the tightly packed earth floated a faint sound in reply. Her head reappeared.

"I'll go down first to tell him it's all right," she murmured. "You wait 'bout two minutes or so, then come 'long. It'll be tight squeezin'—you're so wide acrosst the shoulders—but you can git through."

She pushed the apron-package into the hole. Then she turned once more to him.

"This here is my little secret, that I've come to for years," she told him. "There ain't anybody ever been into it but me—and Steve. The place Uncle Eb took Steve to wasn't so good—it was too easy to find—so I brought him here."

With that she was gone into the gloomy opening.

For a minute or two he waited, looking at the hole and picturing to himself a lonely, heartsick little girl coming here year after year to forget the drunken coarseness of her father and the profane nagging of her mother. A disappointing place, this prosaic cavity; not at all the picturesque grotto his fancy had painted when, in idle moments, his mind had reverted to her confession of a "play-house" where she took refuge by her "own self."

Yet somewhere within it must be a real cavern among the sunken rocks, where, forgetful of the raw crudity of her life, she had lain many a time gazing star-eyed at the figments of her dreams. Did she ever, he wondered, dream of a Prince Charming who should bear her over the hills and far away into a world of lights and laughter, music and perfume?

Perhaps her untutored imagination could not even vision such a world. Perhaps her soul, like her body, was hemmed in by the eternal rim of the rock bowl—that soul which yet groped vaguely upward with its unconscious artistry, its vision of dead men who shook the hills with their tramping, its effort to place on paper the beauty of the green pool in Coxing Kill. Perhaps Lou Brackett's dictum was inexorably true—

"Them that's borned into the Traps lives into the Traps and dies into the Traps."

Recalling himself, he dropped to his knees, dubiously sized up the passage, sank prone, and began worming his way inward.

Once inside, he found that it was not so black as it had looked. Somewhere ahead, light came faintly up from a lower level. The tunnel slanted at an easy grade and curved a little to the right. For the first few feet he found her surmise correct—it was a tight passage for him. But, after inching along in growing distaste for the squeezing discomfort of the hole, he found the rock walls veering aside and lifting above him. A few feet more, and he had room to rise to all fours. The dim light grew a shade stronger. He found his face hanging over a drop, below which was a steep, curving chute.

Swinging his feet foremost, he went over and down, sliding a little but holding himself by hand-grips along the wall. He stopped on the level lip of another drop.

Before him widened an oblong cavern, fairly well lighted by rifts in the stony walls and by another entrance at its farther end—a sizable hole at the floor-level, evidently leading downward. It looked quite dry, except for a tiny trickle of water down one side; its floor was well carpeted with leaves, obviously brought in from above; and in the walls were irregular natural shelves, most of which held small treasures of childhood—a cracked cup or two, worn-out cooking utensils—such things as a little girl might have brought there to make it a real "play-house." And some six feet away was the little girl herself—Marion—with her wild Steve.

"H'are ye, Hamp," the youth hoarsely greeted him—and clutched at his chest. For a second or two he set his teeth; then, throwing one sleeve across his mouth to muffle the sound, coughed repeatedly. When he lowered the arm his lips were drawn. Dumbly he rubbed his chest.

"Howdy, partner," Douglas returned, surveying him keenly and noting his haggard face and hollow eyes. "Sore inside?"

"Got cold," nodded Steve. "Can't stop this 'ere cough a-rackin'. Can't sleep good. An' ther's a misery onto my left lung. Lot o' pains like red-hot needles. Got to breathe short. Cough nigh rips the lung outen me. Makes too much noise too. If them dicks hearn it——"

He spoke in short whispers, his hand rubbing mechanically, as if it had done the same thing at frequent intervals for many hours. The man above regarded him gravely. Though strong of lung himself, he knew what pleurisy was; knew, too, that there was such a thing as pleuro-pneumonia. The lad below looked to be rapidly heading into something of the kind. He certainly was not the healthy young fellow he had been that day in Uncle Eb's barn.

"Head ache? Feel hot?" Douglas quizzed.

"Yuh. Head's like to split. I'm hot all over, like."

Another strangled cough, with its after-grimace of pain. Douglas looked below, found a couple of shelves forming natural steps, and descended. He laid a hand on Steve's forehead. The hot skin seemed to burn him.

"Hm! I was afraid so," he muttered. "Fever, headache, pleural pains, cough. Hm! Well, Steve, now listen. You're sick. If you stay here you'll be sicker. Now my place is sort of lonesome, and nobody calls on me; and the woods are right

handy to the back door, so you could make a quick getaway if you had to; and it's dry and——"

A determined shake of the head cut short his preamble.

"Marry told me," the lad refused. "I ain't a-goin'. Mebbe I'm sick. Mebbe I'll die. But it's all right. I'll die by inches 'fore I'll go wher' I'll git caught."

"Don't be a fool! What's the good of——"

"Don't say no more. I ain't a-goin'. Ther's things wuss'n me dyin'. Goin' back to the pen's one. Gittin' my friends into trouble's 'nother. I ain't got but three friends into the world. Marry an' you an' Uncle Eb. I come awful nigh gittin' two o' ye into a mess t'other day. Them dicks'd make ye sweat blood if they knowed ye was a-helpin' me. An' I don't danger ye no more."

He writhed with another cough. Amazed by the unexpected chivalry of the hill-boy, Douglas stood dumb. Presently Steve went on with the same pain-clipped sentences.

"'Sides, I can't live into a house. Marry'll tell ye that. I warn't borned into a house. I was dropped into the woods like—like a wolf pup. I can die like that same wolf: into the rocks or the trees. I ain't a-dyin' yet, any way. An' till I do die——

"I went to school a little. Not much. Couldn't stand it 'less'n the winders was open. But I learnt readin'. I see a piece 'bout a feller that said 'Gimme liberty or gimme death.' That's me. I live free—if it's into a hole. Mebbe I die into the same hole. But I die free—not like a rat into a house-wall. Gimme liberty or——"

A tearing spasm of muffled coughing ended his talk. When it had passed he slumped down against the side of the cavern, his brow knotted in agony, his hand rubbing feebly, but his gaunt jaw set like the rock against which he leaned. And Douglas, after a moment more of grave study, gave him up. He was not to have company in his haunted house after all. His toil last night on the rear door and the bedroom window had come to naught.

Yet the time was to come when, despite the flat refusal of the fugitive to leave his den, that smooth-sliding back window in Hampton's home was to serve Steve well.

CHAPTER XXI

THE HAND OF THE GHOST

DOUGLAS pushed off his hat and ran a hand through his hair, puzzling over what to do now. Despite Marion's prediction, he had not seriously considered the possibility of an inflexible rejection of his offer, and now he was somewhat at a loss.

Squatting beside Steve, he absently dug up his empty pipe and puffed at it, thinking. Steve looked wistful, but said nothing. Marion, sitting on a little leaf-cushioned projection of stone, watched both of them unobserved.

The contrast between the two male faces was striking. Douglas, blond, strong, clean of skin and clear-cut of feature, thoughtfully serious, working out the problem of helping another; Steve, swarthy, wan, black-bristled, unkempt, grim-jawed, determined to follow his own course despite reason and sense; truly, they seemed as opposite as light and darkness, as blithe hope and somber desperation.

Yet the dark face, perhaps, would strike more forcefully on vibrant heart-strings; for mingled with its resolution was an unconscious pathos. To a sympathetic eye, too, the ragged, shapeless clothing of the younger man would have appealed more strongly than the well-fitting garb of the other. But Marion was not looking at the dress of the pair. Silently, steadfastly, here in her dream-cavern, she was studying faces—and men.

"Well," Douglas said slowly, removing his pipe—and stopped.

He saw the hollow eyes, eloquent with tobacco-hunger, follow the motion of the blackened brier. Wiping its stem on a sleeve, he passed it over. Steve grabbed it and began eagerly sucking in the strong incense of bygone smokes. The little touch of comradeship was not lost on the girl, nor was the next movement of the blond man. He produced a tobacco-tin, picked out a third of its contents, and handed the rest to Steve.

"Better not smoke it," he suggested. "The smoke will float outside. Chew it. I'll have Uncle Eb get more for both of us. Now I won't argue with you about moving. You say you won't, and that ends it. But you've got to doctor up. You've got to bake that pain out of your lung, kill

that cough, knock out the headache and fever, keep warm and dry. Take care of yourself. Remember you're not so hardy as you were three years ago."

Steve nodded, grinding the pipe-stem between his teeth.

"Them three years would of kilt me, but I had to live to git Snake."

"Uh-huh. Now I'll go home and send up the best medicine I have. It isn't much; mostly quinin. But you take it. Tonight, when there isn't much chance that anybody'll be prowling up here, you make a fire, boil some water, bake your chest with hot cloths. Marion can fix you up a mustard-plaster, too, and fetch it back with the medicine; you wrap it around that lung, and it ought to draw out the misery. I'll send you up some good wool socks, too. And you wear 'em! Now will you follow Old Doc Hampton's orders?"

"I'll foller 'em, Hamp."

"Good enough. Now I'll go get that medicine." He arose and clapped on his hat. "I won't be back here myself unless I'm needed—the fewer that come here the better. But take care of yourself."

Steve gripped the extended hand, his face softening.

"Much 'bliged, Hamp. An' take care o' yer own self. Snake's a-fixin' to git ye some way, I bet ye. Cuss him, will I ever git to him?"

In the cavernous eyes, in the prediction of trouble from Snake, were a significance which Douglas was to remember later on, but which he hardly noticed now. He only answered the rebellious question:

"Not until you're able to handle him. Right now you can't even handle yourself."

Steve's mouth tightened in angry admission that he realized it. With a last long draw at the pipe he handed it back.

"I'll handle him right rough 'fore long," he gritted. "G'by."

With a nod and a smile Douglas followed Marion, who, still wordless, now was half out of sight in the lower entrance. Down they went, passing through a series of smaller caverns, twisting and crouching and dropping, until they came out into sunlight. Before them, hardly a rod away, rose the face of the cliff. Around were boulders half as big as houses. Among these the girl led an irregular way—and they were under an overhanging crag, looking out across the Traps.

Looking back, he decided that any one would have an extremely difficult time in finding Steve's covert unless guided to it. Once away from here, he doubted whether he himself could retrace his course. Marion's dream-cave was as complete a hiding-place as could well be imagined: double entrances and exits, both almost impossible of discovery, the upper one forming a natural flue for a night fire; well watered, with wood at hand for the taking, plenty of air and sufficient light; yes, it was almost ideal—until the snows should come.

"Go careful down here," the girl's voice broke in on his reflections. "It's pretty rough. Here's where I took a fall the night the catamount 'most got me."

Down again they went, over a steep talus; among more boulders, and out at last on grassy, bushy soil; through undergrowth to a faint foot-track running north. Along this they trod for some time in silence.

"If it's a fair question, what did Steve mean by saying he was born like a wolf-pup?" he asked at length.

"It's so," she said, half-reluctantly. "His—his folks wasn't married, and his pop went off and left his mom 'fore Steve was borned, and he never come back. His mom, she went kind of queer into the head about it. She was into the woods all the time, a-travelin' and a-whisperin', folks say. Steve was borned outdoors, like he says. She died pretty soon, and so he hasn't got any folks."

Another long silence. Now he knew what Uncle Eb meant by saying the boy had been born unlucky and never had had a chance. Poor, pitiful little tragedy of the hills! The girl deserted by her man just when she most needed his companionship and protection; the staring, whispering young mother-to-be wandering in the leafy solitudes; the new little life coming into the world as primitively as that of the first-born son of mankind; the kindly old Mother Earth taking back into her great bosom one more of her daughters who had loved and lost—a tragedy ever new, yet old as the trust of women and the callousness of men. Poor little mother! Poor Steve!

He might have asked more about the boy—how he had lived and grown—but a glance at the girl told him she would say

no more. In all his wanderings among the people of the Traps, this was the first time any one had told him anything about the past of another; and even now it probably was told only because Steve himself had virtually given permission. He asked nothing further. It was she who now asked a question or two of her own.

"When you asked him to come down to your house had you forgot the ha'nt might git him?"

"By George, I did! Clean forgot that ha'nt of mine. Is that why he wouldn't come?"

"No-o, I guess not. Not so much. But mebbe 'twas one of the things he was thinkin' about; he figgers a lot of things into his head that don't come outen his mouth. But tell me, jest what does that ha'nt do? The same kind of things all the time? Nobody else ever stayed there long 'nough to find out if the ha'nt worked reg'lar. You know him pretty well by now, I shouldn't wonder."

"Well, I don't pay much attention to him. He—or it—scared me green in the face the first night, but he's never done me any real harm, and I've never seen anything in a white sheet gibbering at me—nor anything else. But this is what I know about him."

And he described the muffled footfalls in attic and stairway, the rustling and movement of the mattress, and the uncanny suggestion that *something* else was there.

"Ooh!"

She shuddered and looked nervously around. Then, banishing the visions conjured up by his words, she became practical.

"Did you ever think that mebbe the thing walkin' round was a rat?"

"A rat? If he is, Mister Rat has feet as big as pillows. I thought of it, yes. But it's queer—I've never heard a rat or a mouse scamper or gnaw in that house. You'd think there would be plenty of them, but I've never seen nor heard a sign. And I'm positive it was no rat that got into bed with me."

"M-hm. Well, I wonder, now—do you want a cat? We've got four of 'em, always pesterin' round for somethin' to eat. They're Spit and Spat and Fit and Fat—I named 'em all my own self. Spit and Spat are ugly and they make noises like their names. Fit has fits and Fat's fat. I'll give you Spit if you want him. He's quick as lightnin' and an awful good ratter, and he'll be company for you, too. Leave that attic door open and see what he'll do. Want to?"

"All right," he chuckled. "But if that heavy-footed ha'nt steps on Spit's tail and Spit raises the roof with a gosh-awful yowl when I'm asleep—there won't be any house left. I'll go head first through the wall and knock down the whole layout."

She burst into a merry laugh, in which he joined. Quickly she suppressed it, however, looking around once more—not for a night-walking fantom this time, but for something which prowled as stealthily by day, ranging the whole countryside: the sinister pair whose presence kept Steve in a hole in the ground.

"You hadn't ought to make me laugh so sudden-like," she reproved.

But as they went onward she giggled several times, and he chuckled in sympathy. Nothing more was said, however, until they emerged into a small field. Before them, dingy and bare, stood the Oaks house.

"Lost?" she smiled then, seeing his surprized look. "Didn't think it was so nigh, did you? We come back by the short way—it don't take half as long as goin'. Tell me—" she drew closer to him "—what you a-huntin' pop for?"

He hesitated. Then, as bluntly as she had revealed her knowledge of Lou and the bridge, he told her. She did not seem much surprized, though she was plainly disturbed.

"I was 'fraid so," she murmured. "I figgered 'twas somethin' like that, after you brought that corn-hook home. But if pop done that, 'twas Snake that put him up to it! Consarn him!"

She stamped a foot in swift wrath.

"Snake! He *is* a snake—a nasty p'isonous copperhead that bites without a warnin'! And he gits clear while other folks pay!"

"Snake's the man I want," he acquiesced. "I've been after him, too. But I want to get the truth out of your pop. And I'll get it——"

"I'm 'fraid you won't," she interrupted soberly. "I'm 'fraid he's gone for good. Seems like we'd have heard somethin' 'fore if he was a-livin'. Mebbe—mebbe Snake done somethin' to him that night. Snake,

he's a-layin' awful low since then; nobody's seen him."

"Well, he'll come to light some time. He'll have to. And now we have to look out for somebody else. I'll get down to the house and bring up that medicine. By-by."

"G'by."

They parted, to his mingled regret and relief—for, be a girl's father ever so base, it is inevitably distasteful to discuss with her that father's ignominy. Down the road he walked fast toward his own abode and the waiting medicine.

With the sun-baked sand under his feet he realized anew how unseasonably hot was the day. The air was breathless, and heat-waves curved and twined visibly along the highway. Soon he shed his coat and shoved back his hat. As he neared his haunted house, too, he became more and more aware that the atmosphere was tainted by the same odor which had been breeze-borne to his nostrils earlier in the day.

Then, rounding the little curve beyond which stood the Dalton house, he checked his stride.

Beside the road, in his own yard, were a weatherbeaten wagon and a white horse. They were Uncle Eb's. The old man himself was not in sight.

Douglas jumped forward with increased speed. Uncle Eb might be waiting for him in the house, but that was hardly likely; the old man did not like that house. Had something happened to him?

The explosive voice of Eb himself came to him. It broke from the brushy land on the other side of the road, mingled with sounds of progress through thick going.

"Jest like Jake Dalton," it was saying, "jest like I'm a-tellin' ye. Hampton never had no hand into this, though I wouldn't blame him none s'posin' he had— Wal! Thar he is now!"

From the brush emerged Eb and two others: The man-hunters, Ward and Bill. All were chewing tobacco furiously. All looked pale.

"What's wrong?" Douglas sharply demanded.

"Wrong! Good gosh, son, is yer nose stopped? It's Nat!"

Dumb, the blond man gaped at the three. Ward and Bill were eying him keenly. Uncle Eb pulled off his hat, mopped his brow on a sleeve, squirted a mouthful of brown juice, and went on barking:

"Jest like Jake Dalton! He's up into the bresh—'side the brook—face down an' deader'n—wal, 'most as dead as Jake. He's been thar three—four days, these fellers think—ever sence he run outen yer house that night he left his cawn-hook. An' this hot weather today—wugh! I ain't a-goin' to High Falls today after all. I'm a-goin' right back home soon's we—. Have ye got a shovel? Nat needs a shovel powerful bad."

"What happened to him?"

Somehow Douglas knew the answer already, but he had to ask.

"What happened to Jake Dalton? I dunno. But he's jest like Jake—swelled up awful, an' not a mark onto him—no gunshot, no knife, no nawthin'—jest dead! Ther's sumpthin' into that house o' yourn, son—that ha'nt or sumpthin', I dunno—that kilt him jest the same's it kilt Jake. He run into the bresh an' fell down an' died same's Jake done. Have ye got that shovel?"

"No."

"Wal, I'll go borry one. Glad to git away a few minutes. Hoss, c'm'ere! Whoa! G'yapalong!"

With an apprehensive backward look at the house the agitated old fellow was off. The man-hunters spat in unison, never taking their eyes off Douglas, who still stared at the brush. Mechanically he got out his pipe, loaded it, lighted it and puffed.

"Well, fellows," he said presently, "this is news to me. I've been hunting this Nat Oaks—he was the one I suspected of knifing my dummy—but I didn't finish him. Looks bad for me, perhaps, but——"

"You're in the clear," cut in Ward. "We might make out a case if we tried hard enough, but we ain't tryin'. If the stiff had wounds on him you might have some explainin' to do; and we're goin' to do some lookin' round, anyhow. But unless somethin' new turns up we'll leave the thing lay as it is."

Douglas nodded and reluctantly stepped toward the hidden brook. The other two remained where they were.

A short distance in from the road he found Nigger Nat. He was stark naked, his clothing having been cut from him by the pocketknives of the officers in their search for wounds. Feet, hands, and face were mired by the mud in which he had expired; and the gross face now was a

bloated mask of bestiality. Nowhere on the torso was any mark.

Douglas took one rapid, comprehensive look. Then he retired hastily to the road, where he reloaded his hot pipe and awaited the return of Uncle Eb. Wordless, two chewing and one smoking, the trio of city men stood regarding the haunted house.

The ha'nt, which of late Douglas had carelessly regarded as a sort of joke, was a joke no longer. With his own eyes he had just looked on the horrid handiwork of the grisly thing which stalked within those walls by night. What was it? Why had it not closed its fearful grip on his own throat? How long before it would do so?

Perhaps Jake Dalton and Nat Oaks knew the answer to the ghastly riddle. But their lips were sealed for all time.

CHAPTER XXII

IN THE SHADOWS

IN THE house where Nigger Nat, assassin, had himself been struck by the hand of Death in the night, Douglas Hampton, alias Hammerless, alias Hamp, sat alone.

Nigger Nat lay in his grave, if grave it could be called; a hastily dug hole into which he had been rolled like a dead skunk. No pretense of ceremony, and certainly none of mourning, had graced his departure from the sight of men. Nor was any head-board set above his mound. As soon as he had been disposed of, his burial party had departed with all speed.

For the sake of the living, however, the spot where he lay would be not only marked, but improved. Even now his head-board was being carved—and by the man whom he had attempted to murder. On a piece of planking, found among the odds and ends of Jake Dalton's shed and dressed clean with the hatchet, Douglas was cutting in deep, bold letters—

NAT—OAKS

He intended, too, to clear away the brush around the mound and cut to it a straight trail from the road, so that the women whom Nat left behind him could—if they wished—visit his grave. But that work could wait for another day. Now, while Hampton's hands were drawing his knife-point along the neat lines and hollowing out the spaces between them, his mind was reviewing the events since the interment.

For a time the four men, united in a common task of humanity, had shelved their mutual distrust in fruitless search for the cause of Nat's death. With Douglas' tacit permission, the pair of officers had inspected the house from roof to foundations, Uncle Eb meanwhile narrating in full the tale of Jake Dalton's death. Douglas in turn had told of his first meeting with Oaks, the fight with the dogs and Nat himself, his whim to view the sunrise, his finding of the corn-hook driven into the dummy. He did not, however, deem it necessary to mention the warning note which he had partly burned.

"The feller ye want to git," Uncle Eb barked, rounding on Ward and Bill, "is Snake Sanders! Git him an' ye've got the man that's back of all the devil-work into the Traps. If ye make him talk, ye'll git an awful lot o' knowledge all to oncet."

The pair, taking in everything and saying almost nothing, had nodded slightly at this. And at length, noncommittal as to what they might plan to do, they had gone. Before departure, however, Ward had scoffed at the ha'nt.

"I don't take any stock in this ghost stuff," he said. "Oaks was an old souse. Heart prob'ly was rotten with booze. He came in here with a bun on, took a swipe at the dummy, got cold feet sudden—heard somethin', perhaps, a rat or somethin'—and beat it. Heart quit on him, and he croaked.

"This Dalton, you say he was a souse too. Funny that two guys should croak the same way in the same place, yeah. But if the booze you guys make around here is as bad as the wildcat whiskey I've struck in some other places, I ain't much surprized. It'd kill anybody that lapped it up for a steady diet. So long. Come on, Bill."

When they were out of the way, Douglas had talked awhile with Uncle Eb. To him he had told something of Steve's condition, and from him he had learned that Marion already knew of the finding of her father's body. In his straightforward way Uncle Eb had gone to the nearest place—the Oaks house—for the shovel, and had given her the news. She had said little—"acted 'most like she was expectin' sumpthin' like that," Eb said—and gone at once to her mother.

"An' now 'bout you, son—ye better not stay into this place no longer," the old man

had concluded. "Come up an' live 'long o' me, don't ye want to?"

But the anxious invitation was declined with thanks. Douglas had determined to do now something which more than once previously he had thought of doing—to remain awake all night and catch the ha'nt, if it could be caught. The presence of the thing in his house was a challenge to him; and if the fantom walked tonight, he vowed, he would smash it or himself be smashed. This intention, however, he kept to himself, merely saying that he had been unharmed thus far and knew no reason why he should not remain so.

So, bearing with him the quinin and other medicines which Douglas thought might be useful to Steve, the old man had gone back to the Oaks house and then home. Under the circumstances, Douglas himself did not feel like intruding just then on the girl and her mother; and the errand could be done just as well by Uncle Eb. And now, back to the wall and eyes lifting now and then to survey all around him, Hampton was toiling on the headboard. And the hot day was nearing its end.

Lucky, thrice lucky had been Steve's refusal to accompany him home, he thought: lucky for Steve, for Marion, for himself. Alone, he had come back openly and opportunely. With Steve he would have come more slowly and furtively, and by that time the man-hunters might have been scouting around in the woods on an investigation tour—and promptly sprung on their prey. There would certainly have been a fight, and before it ended Hampton and even Marion might have outlawed themselves. Yes, it was lucky all around.

Leaning back, he inspected his handiwork, yawned, and clicked his knife shut. Nigger Nat's monument was completed. Glancing through the open doorway at the lengthening shadows, he raised his brows and pulled out his watch.

"Where's the time gone?" he asked himself. "It's almost sundown. Better rustle some grub and clear the decks for action against Mister Ha'nt. Hope this isn't his night off. Do ha'nts work union hours, I wonder? Midnight to daybreak, maybe? Might get some sleep if I only knew. It's going to be a long, long night."

He yawned again, drowsy from the heavy heat of the day. When his supper was eaten and his pipe was going he yawned still more widely. Twilight now filled the great bowl outside—the oddly transparent twilight of early evening in the Traps, which lay in shadow while the sun still shone beyond the western heights. Next would come the grayish blur of true twilight, deepening gradually into night. And when dense darkness should enwrap all things and the evil man-killer of this house should begin to stir about—then what?

He arose, stretching and shaking himself to cast off his sleepiness. After a turn up and down the room he lifted his gun, ejected the shells, tested the firing-pins with a snap or two, looked carefully at the ammunition, and reloaded.

"Little old gun, you've been a real pal," he soliloquized. "I bought you just because you looked good and because I thought I might get a bit of hunting somewhere up in this country before going back to town. Little did I think you'd save a girl and blow cats and dogs all to thunder and shoot at ha'nts——"

"Yoo-hoo!"

The musical call from outside cut short his monolog. In three strides he was at the door. At the edge of the road stood Marion. On the sand at her feet rested a sack in which something was tumbling about.

"Don't you never put down that gun, even when you're into the house?" she asked as he crossed the grass-ground.

He looked foolishly down at the forgotten weapon, still gripped loosely in one hand. Without awaiting an answer, she went on:

"But you need it, I shouldn't wonder. Are you a-goin' to stay here now, after—after what come to pop?"

"Yep. Going to sit up tonight and see what will happen."

She contemplated him soberly, then looked down at the bag.

"I figgered that's what you'd do. I—I wish you wouldn't. But I brought down some company, like I promised. This here is Spit."

As if answering to its name, the moving thing in the sack vented a catty spitting sound.

"You'll want to shut the door and the winders, if there's any open, 'fore you untie his bag," she cautioned. "He's wild, and he'll go like a shot if there's any way outen the house."

"I'll take care of him. Why do you wish I wouldn't stay here?"

She flushed a little, looked at him, dropped her eyes again and stirred the sand with a foot.

"Why, you—you're a neighbor, kind of. And you—you've been good to Steve." The name came in a whisper.

"Oh. I see. Did you take the medicine to him?"

"Yes. He's a-takin' care of himself. But he's wilder'n ever at Snake Sanders, now he knows about pop. He didn't like pop much, but it makes him hate Snake all the more. Where—where is pop?"

"Over yonder," he told her gently. "In a day or so you can go in. I'm going to cut a path. You're not blaming me for this thing, are you, Marion?"

"No, I ain't. Mom, she's wild jest now—says if you never come here this wouldn't happened, and so on—but that's foolish, and I told her so. She'll git over it. But—" the firm little jaw set "—if Snake Sanders comes a-pesterin' round once more now he won't never walk outen our yard! I'll fix him my own self!"

"How?"

"With pop's gun. 'Tain't much good, but it'll shoot. I got it ready this afternoon, and if I see his sneakin' face jest once I won't ask questions. I never wanted to see him 'fore, but I'm lookin' for him now!"

It was no sudden flare of temper that brought forth the threat. It was the cold wrath of the hills that sounded in her quiet voice, the deathless hate of the avenger that glimmered under her curving brows. Once more Douglas studied a new Marion; a girl resolute, reckless, ominously hard.

"I wouldn't do that," he counseled. "Put the gun on him, but don't shoot. March him down here and let me have him. Maybe I can make him clear Steve."

"Mebbe," she half agreed. "I'm a-goin' now. It's gittin' dark. G'by."

She was gone, running lightly along the shadowy road. Until she disappeared he stood watching her. Then he lifted the bag and returned to the house.

Mindful of her caution, he shut the outer door and closed the window of his sleeping-room before removing the cord from the mouth of the sack. It was well that he did. When the rangy, rumpled Spit was dumped on the bare floor he gave one baleful glare at the man towering over him, one swift survey of his surroundings, one spitting comment on the place—then he was not where he had been. He was tearing about like tawny lightning let loose.

Douglas made no effort to pursue him. To do so would have been as futile as chasing a comet. He only stood marveling at the animal's speed and wondering whether he had not better let him out before he shot bodily through a window-pane. What good would Spit do here, anyway? He would be only a complication in the still-hunt of the ha'nt. But—Marion had taken the trouble to bring him, and— Oh well, let him stay.

The lank, homely brute threw himself at every window, every door, seeming hardly to have hit one before he was at another. The man gave up even trying to watch him. Moving to his supply-shelf, he cut a chunk of raw bacon and held it until the baffled Spit finally paused, looking for a new point of attack. Then he threw the meat.

Spit jumped into the air, came down glaring, circled the meat, spat at it, sniffed at it, tasted it, considered it with tail yanking from side to side—and accepted it. With famished speed he gnawed it down. When it was gone he lapped his jaws and looked at the man with a shade of friendliness. It was poor cat-food, that smoked fat; but it was food, and the half-wild creature would eat almost anything. In fact, he was ready to devour more of the same.

But he got no more. The man placed on the floor a cupful of water, then shoved his backless chair against the rear wall and settled himself for the vigil. The gloaming now was rapidly thickening into darkness, and there was nothing to do but await events.

For some time he sat quiet, hearing only the solemn chant of deep-voiced crickets, the muffled conversation of katydids, the almost inaudible padding of the cat's feet on the boards. Now and then he vaguely made out the lean form of the animal pausing near him. Then it moved and vanished into the gloom, uneasily inspecting every inch of the strange quarters. Nothing else passed within his range of vision; nothing stepped around upstairs; nothing rustled in the bedroom.

An hour droned past, and another crept on its way. The silent man's lids began to droop. His recently formed habit of going to bed early was asserting itself. So were the drowsiness and languor induced by the bygone heat. The steady chirp of the

crickets, too, and the dull darkness—they were floating him gradually away on an ebb of consciousness. He shook himself awake, shifted his position, leaned forward, away from the wall. With renewed alertness he probed the gloom. Nothing was there.

Little by little another hour snailed along. Little by little the watcher slumped farther forward. His gun remained steady across his knees, his eyes stayed open; but his elbows were resting now on his thighs, and his gaze was a somnolent squint, centered on nothing. His body was half-asleep, his mind more than half-asleep; for it was dreaming, seeing things gone by and places far away, and other things much nearer—but not in this house: some things, indeed, which had not yet come about and might never come. And still nothing occurred to disturb his reverie.

Physical discomfort, not ghostly alarms, roused him again. The chair was hard, his position was growing cramped, his muscles demanded better comfort. Scanning the room again, he noted with surprize that he could see much more plainly. The windows, too, were light, and through them he could make out the darksome bulk of the trees. The Traps gulf was wanly illumined by a late-rising moon.

Stiffly he arose to stretch himself. Something turned gleaming eyes at him. It was Spit, very quiet now, crouched comfortably on the floor, watching two doors—the open one into the bedroom and the closed one at the foot of the stairs. Man and cat eyed each other a moment. Then the man in turn looked toward a door—the entrance to his own room, beyond which waited his blankets and easy couch of bough-tips.

After all, why not? He could sit against the wall there, rest his legs and back, and still keep awake. Better take the cat in there, too; then he wouldn't start clawing up toward the bacon-shelf or making other disturbance. Might as well be comfortable. As soon as he heard the ha'nt begin to tramp around he could slip out and see whatever might be seen. All right, he would do it.

By patient persistence, he inveigled the suspicious but curious Spit into the rear room. Entering it himself, he had an afterthought: he reached to the attic door, turned its knob, swung it open, leaving free access for the stair-bumping spook. Then he went into his room and almost closed the door, leaving it only a little ajar to obviate the fumbling and noise of knob-turning when the time to leap out should come. Making sure that Spit still was there, he relaxed against the wall, gun ready beside him. And——

In less than twenty minutes all good intentions and cats and ha'nts were obliterated from his mind by the velvety hand of Sleep.

What time it was when he awoke he never knew. But awake he did, to find himself lurching upward, every nerve tense, his gun clutched in his right hand.

The door was open wider now—open nearly a foot. In the room beyond lay slanting moonlight.

Out there, something was struggling.

Something was making a low, ghastly, unhuman noise.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE DEMON OF THE DARK

DOUGLAS felt his hair lift and his skin prickle, ice-cold. But he knocked the door wide and plunged out. In the moonshine stood no horrible figure. The noise was coming from the floor; a growling sound, a slithering scrape, irregular paddings, and the scratch of claws on wood.

There, in the semi-darkness between two windows, a small huddle writhed in hideous combat. Rooted to the floor, Douglas stood watching its contortions. Gradually the writhing movements diminished. But the low growl continued, and from the spot glared the fiery eyes of a cat which had made its kill.

The man started from his paralysis. Scratching a match along the wall, he held the little flare above his head and stared until his fingers twitched back, burned.

"Well—I'll—be—" he muttered, his voice trailing into nothing.

He had looked on the ha'nt. He had seen Dalton's Death, murderer of men—expiring in the jaws of a tom-cat.

Snatching the gas-lamp from its nail, he got it to burning and turned its ray on the uncanny little bunch below. In the white radiance the thing stood out in horrid clarity. Though merged together, it comprised three separate parts. They were cat—rat—rattlesnake.

The cat's teeth were clamped in the neck of the reptile. The venomous fangs of the reptile were hooked into the head of the rat.

The head of the rat was nearly hidden within the distended jaws of the sinuous slayer.

This much of the story was plain at a glance: The snake had killed the rat, begun to swallow its prey, and in its turn been pounced upon by the lightning-leaping Spit. But how had rodent and reptile come here? Why had he never seen them before? Why had Spit allowed the snake to get the rat first? Why did that snake's tail, still moving, give out no warning burr?

Douglas wasted no more time in puzzlement. Instead he began a close inspection—as close as seemed safe, in view of the fact that the savage cat struck viciously at him with hooked claws when he came too near. It was by no means impossible that some snake-venom might be on those claws, and the investigator was wary of them. Moving around with the light, he studied snake and rodent.

The rat was long, lank, and old. Its hoary hair, its big feet, the tip of one whitish whisker still visible at the edge of the serpent's gaping mouth, all proved its age. It was so old that it would move clumsily. In a silent house its feet would thump on the floor. If it descended stairs it would bump.

Nothing very queer about the rat. But about the snake was something very queer indeed. Though it was well grown—more than a yard long, in fact—and thus should have been well equipped with the warning buttons of its species, it had none. It was a rattler without a rattle.

True, its tail bore a small rounded excrescence which might be an incipient button; but not a real, well-developed one. Somehow the tail looked blunt; as if a rattle once had been there but had been cut off, accidentally or otherwise. It kept moving, so that it was rather vague in outline. There was no doubt, however, about the absence of the horny joints which should have been there.

Narrow-eyed, Douglas stood regarding that unnatural tail. For no apparent reason, he suddenly wheeled and looked at the windows. Against the panes was pressed no leering face. Outside in the moonlight stood no sinister form. Slowly he turned back. Into his mind had flashed the picture of Snake Sanders loosing from a box on Dickie Barre a copperhead. Was the appearance of the snake in this house another attempt of the same sort?

"No!" Reason told him. This thing had not been brought here tonight. It must have been in the place a long time. Two men had been killed by it. One, whose freshly carved headboard even now stood against the wall, had died several nights ago. The other had been struck down last spring. Beyond a doubt, this was what had ended the lives of Jake and Nat—striking at their bare feet, driving them in blind horror from the house, leaving on their skins only two tiny wounds which, days later, would be overlooked by the men finding their frightful corpses in the woods or the brush. This creature must have been here for months.

His deductions were interrupted by Spit. Tiring at last of worrying its broken enemy, or perhaps eager to begin eating the rat, the cat loosed its hold and, ceaselessly growling, stepped around and smelt at the gray-haired victim of the snake.

"Hey! Quit that!" Douglas snapped. "You fool cat, that rat's poisoned! If you have the slightest scratch on your lips or in your mouth you'll die! Let it alone!"

At the impact of his voice Spit leaped aside, spat at him, stood flame-eyed, lips writhing and claws unsheathed. So menacing was the appearance of the creature, so evident its readiness to battle for possession of that rat, that the man took a backward step. Claws and teeth both might be envenomed; even if they were not, he knew that an ordinary cat-bite sometimes results fatally. But he did not intend to let the cat commit suicide. True, the poison might not injure the animal's stomach, but if it entered the blood——

He shoved the bare flame of his lamp straight at the snarling visage. It was the best move he could have made. Had he attempted to grasp the animal, or even to push it away with a foot, the maddened creature might have sprung at him. At that moment a mere man meant little to that wild brute. But before the fire-demon imprisoned in that lamp, before the searing blue-white tongue licking out at his face, even Spit's savage heart quailed. Spitting furiously, he sprang back.

Inexorably the flame followed him. It pressed him back into the bedroom. Then the outer door was drawn open. The light retreated. Spit sneaked back into the main room—but the white-hot tongue was waiting for him. It slid forward once more.

Suddenly it made a twisting swoop toward his mouth. That was too much. With a snarly squall of panic a tawny streak shot through the doorway into the night. Spit was gone.

The door bumped shut. The man straightened up, relaxed, chuckled shortly. Then he turned the light again on the feebly squirming reptile and the lifeless rat; studied them a moment more; looked at the clean pine monument of Nat Oaks glimmering yellowish in the background; pivoted on his heels and frowningly contemplated the bedroom where both Jake and Nat had met their doom. For some minutes he stood there, playing the light over every visible inch of the room, particularly along the floor. Suddenly he started as if a dazzling ray had darted through his mental fog.

"By thunder!" he muttered. "I'll bet——"

In another three seconds he was flat on the bedroom floor, shooting the light along the under side of the bed. He saw a series of squares of rope, upholding the thick corn-husk mattress. Within each square the mattress bellied downward. And in one of those rounded curves of cloth, near the outer edge of the bed, opened a hole.

Douglas lay there, staring up at that hole, until his position grew cramped. It was round and smooth-edged; the edges looked worn, as if something had often passed in and out—something scaly, perhaps, whose passage would wear away loose threads. The sagging cloth hung not more than a foot above the floor. And, now that his nose was near it, he became conscious of a repellent odor—a smell suggesting snakiness.

"Ugh!" He scrambled to his feet and took a breath of clean air. His gaze fell on the rent left in the middle of the bed by Nigger Nat's steel. Swift aversion to the whole room seized him. He spun about and stepped out of it. And as he left it he did something he never had done before—he pulled its creaky door shut behind him. He was through with that loathsome death-chamber for all time.

The dead snake now was almost motionless: only the blunt tail still quivered in reptilian tremors. Giving it only a passing glance, Douglas stopped before the open staircase and swung the light slowly from side to side, examining every step. When the all-revealing radiance was centered on the top he stood as if puzzled. Down to the bottom and up to the top he played it again.

'Hm! How come?" he queried.

The darkness gave no answer. Only the solemn crickets dirged on outside.

Up the echoing stairs he clumped, and on the groaning boards above he deliberately moved about, searching the dusty, dusky recesses of the eaves. Presently the moving light stopped, shining steadily into one of the front corners. Through the dingy cobwebs festooning the nook he saw something which brought a satisfied nod.

"One," he said. With that he turned away and began descending the stairs.

Almost at the bottom, he halted short. The downward-pointing ray had revealed a thing hitherto invisible despite his careful scrutiny of the stairs; something which an up-ranging eye never would see, and which was discernible from above only because the swaying light had happened to strike on it.

"Two!" he exulted. "That's it! I've got the combination now. Farewell, Mister Ha'nt! Your little mystery is busted flat."

Yet the thing at which he was looking would hardly seem to be the key to an enigma. It was only a hole, very inconspicuous in the dirty wall, at the junction of the lowest step with the door-casing. And the thing which he had found up-stairs in the corner was merely another hole.

Resuming his downward way, he trod across the main room, leaned his gun against the wall, set his lamp on the stove, filled his pipe, sat down on his chair, puffed smoke, and chuckled.

"Yes sir, Mister Rat, you're caught with the goods at last," he informed the lank old rodent on the floor. "You're the noisy half of the ha'nt. You're old and stiff, and your feet used to bump down like a ghost's heels. You lived around here somewhere—out in the shed, maybe, or up under the attic floor—and you used to come out of that hole in the corner and ramble around, looking for anything to eat. Poor, old Bumpety-Bump, I'll bet you're so ancient that you've lost all your teeth; you certainly look nearly starved. Anyhow, you'd find nothing up there, so you'd bump yourself down-stairs. Probably you smelt my cheese; I had some when I first came here, and Uncle Eb brought me up a huge slab of it later on.

'But when you hit the bottom you were stuck. That door was always shut. So you'd have to give it up. And with that other hole right handy, why go back up-stairs? You'd just ooze into that hole and

let it go at that. So would any other sensible man.

"And that first night, when I came at you with a cannon, you heard me before I could open the door. So you just dived into the handy hole, and when I yanked the door almost off its hinges you were teetotally gone. And while I was standing there growing goose-flesh you were probably sitting up in the wall and thumbing your old nose at me."

He laughed again in quiet self-derision.

"It must have been tough, though, to come down here every night, just drooling for that cheese, and find yourself always blocked. All the same, that's all that saved your life. This other gent here, Mister Side-Winder, must have been rat-hunting every night; that's why I've never heard rats around here; he got 'em all. And to-night when I left that door open and you came out—well, you know as much about that as I do.

"Mister Spit, our little guest of the evening, must have followed my noble example and gone to sleep in there. Or maybe he had a hard time pulling the door open; it does stick when it's almost shut. Anyhow, by the time he catapulted himself into the plot of this piece you were on your way down Mister Rattler's gullet—which was just as well for friend Spit, maybe. He could maul Mister Side-Winder then without a comeback. Glad of it, too. Spit's manners have been neglected, but he's a regular fellow, and I'm glad he didn't have to go out by the same route as Jake and Nat."

He puffed again, and his smile died. When he spoke again his voice was cold.

"And you, Yard-of-Poison—how did you get here? You've been here since Spring. Maybe you came out too early, got caught in a cold snap, found Jake's door open, came in to get warm. Maybe. Anyway, you've been here since then. You found a hole in the under side of the mattress and crawled in among the husks for warmth and concealment. At night you got the warmth of Jake's body, too. And you paid for your lodging as a snake would. Some night when Jake got up in the dark for something you struck his foot. And while he died alone in the black woods behind here you crawled back into your hole, well satisfied with yourself.

"Some other fellows came, and you missed them. They didn't happen to come near you in the night, or you had caught a rat and were sleeping it off in your hole. And then I came. And you're the thing that rustled the mattress beside me that night, and made the rickety old bed tremble—you're the thing I *felt* in the air, there in the room beside me. When I looked under the bed you weren't in sight: you had stopped when you felt me move. But you came out later, all right, and you'd have killed me if I'd stepped near you without my boots. And every night since then you've been sneaking around ready to get me. Lucky I changed beds, and never came out here bare-foot for a drink in the night, and kept my door shut. Maybe Uncle Eb's right, and there's a good angel watching over me. Looks like it.

"And then Nigger Nat came, and you got him. I owe you one for that, perhaps. But he was only a tool. If you'd nailed Snake Sanders, now, I'd be right obliged to you. But you'd never touch him, of course, even if he stepped on you. He's your brother."

For awhile he smoked in thoughtful silence. The buttonless tail now lay inert. Within the house the only movement was that of his own puffing, the only sound the stutter of his wet-stemmed pipe.

"I wonder," he resumed at length. "I wonder whether your brother Snake knows anything about how you lost your rattle. I wonder if he had a grudge against Jake Dalton. If I ever get him in a corner I'll ask him about that. Yes sir, I will."

His pipe stuttered more loudly and went out. A long yawn stretched his face. Reaching to the lamp, he shut off the gas flow and stood up.

"Yes sir," he repeated. "I'll give Snake a third-degree on that point some time. And until then I'll just keep my mouth shut about your demise. I'll throw you two folks back into the woods tomorrow, and I'll let folks think the ha'nt is still ha'nting. And now, with your kind permission, I'm going back to bed. Good night, Mister Ha'nt—good night forever."

CHAPTER XXIV

CROSS TRAILS

NOVEMBER marshaled her gray hosts and marched them across the Shawangunks.

Out of the west they came, a slow, silent,

grim array of clouds, drifting steadily above the puny barrier of the mountains, covering the sky from rim to rim—a vast army which alternately smeared out the sun and allowed it to break through the gaps between their brigades. At times they closed into mass formation and drizzled cold scorn down on the impotent hills and the insignificant dwellers therein. Then they drew apart and resumed their indifferent, disorderly route-step across the heavens, perhaps to spit again on the New England mountains farther east and then swing northward to merge into the fogs and snows of bleak Labrador.

Even when they passed in straggling groups instead of a long battle-line, they gave the sun scant opportunity to light up the whole countryside at once, as he recently had done. Ever their chill shadows were creeping along the ground, darkening long belts of hill and dale while other strips were agleam with light. Only at dark, it seemed, did they draw off into bivouac, leaving the sky clean and clear. Then across the land sped their night-flying ally, Jack Frost.

And with the recurrence of that biting chill the silence of approaching Winter fell on the depths of the Traps. At last the katydids were still. So, too, were the crickets. By night, when the music of hammer and drill was hushed and the cheery voices of roosters and hens were silenced by slumber, the stillness would have been painful but for the gentle murmur of Coxing Kill, singing softly to itself as it crept past the humble homes of the hillmen and on into the north. Only a few weeks more, and even the friendly little stream would lose its voice under the merciless grip of Winter ice. Then indeed stark silence would hold the great bowl at night—desolate, bitter silence broken only by the sough of wind-beaten evergreens and the groans of cold-tortured hardwoods.

That time was not quite come. But even now the face of the Traps was gaunt and harsh. Gone was the velvety mask of green which had partly hidden the austerity of the land; gone, too, the flaunting colors which had replaced the emerald tone. Through the thinned forest everywhere showed thickly strewn boulders and the grim barrenness of crag-face and naked rock slope. The vistas through the brush lengthened in all directions. And with this opening of the woods a new, sullen, ominous noise began to shock the quiet air from time to time—the sulfurous explosion of gunpowder.

Thus far, the guns of the Traps had been noticeably silent. Only at long intervals had one spoken. So dense was the undergrowth that the Trapsmen, knowing they had little chance of sighting game, had almost entirely refrained from hunting. But now the deep roar of muzzle-loading shotguns smashed the stillness early and late, varied occasionally by the blunt bang of some black-powder rifle. Mother Nature, hitherto the protectress of her feathered and furred children, now was betraying them into the hands of men. All hunted things moved with increasing peril.

Yes, all hunted things—human as well as animal. Hunted men, and the friends of those men traversing the brush in furtive missions, were concealed but thinly now by the leafless branches. And while most of the hunters prowling the wilds were seeking only meat and sport, there were also those who stalked more dangerous game.

Three of them, there were. But they did not work together. In fact, one of the three avoided the others, who worked always as a pair. Yet their separate trails crossed at times, and at such times there was a verbal fencing, a give-and-take of half-humorous banter with an undertone of menace. Hammerless Hampton, free ranger, hunter of Snake Sanders and silent partner of Steve, outfaced or outmaneuvered Ward and Bill, who also sought Snake but whose more important quarry was that same Steve—and who, consequently, scrutinized Hampton's movements at every opportunity.

"When we git somethin' on you, Hampton, we'll gather you right in," Ward reiterated in sardonic humor. To which Douglas, with devil-may-care smile, would reply:

"All right. But it'll take both of you to do it. How's business?"

"Oh, pickin' up all the time," with a carelessness that might or might not be assumed. "We know about where one of our guys is hangin' out, but we'll leave him lay until we git to talk to the other one a little. We're gittin' a good vacation, and we ain't in any rush."

How much of this ambiguous answer was true Douglas could not tell. And, suspecting that it was purposely phrased to evoke

questions from him, he made no queries as to which of the "guys" was being spared while the other was sought. Nor did he ever allow his eyes to stray in the direction of Steve's subterranean cavern; he knew Ward was subtly tempting him to give some involuntary indication of his knowledge of the fugitive's reatreat, and he gave none. He observed with misgiving, however, that the pair now seemed always to be somewhere near Dickie Barre.

Ward's half-jest about the "vacation," though, seemed to hold much of truth. He looked like the instinctive out-door-man, who really would derive much pleasure from working in rough country. Certainly both he and Bill showed the good effects of open-air life; the city sleekness of flesh and redness of face had gone, and they were more lean of frame, more lithe of movement, brown of skin and clear of eye. Bill still wore the sour look which seemed habitual, and toward Hampton he always maintained a grouchy silence—perhaps because he knew he would get the worst of any verbal encounter. But, from the physical standpoint, there could be little doubt of his ability to hold his own with almost any one. He and his mate now were a formidable combination.

"If it's not a sassy question, how do you fellows manage to live in here?" Douglas asked at one of their unexpected meetings. "Shouldn't think you'd find it easy to get food and shelter."

"Oh, that's easy. We've got a little shelter of our own, where nobody'll bat us over the dome when we're sleepin'. And for grub, we have a wagon that comes up every so often from down below; meets us outside, and we pack in the fodder. Anything else you want to know?"

"Sure. How much longer are you staying?"

"Till we git our man, of course. Do I have to keep tellin' you? It's takin' a little longer than we thought, but we'll be here as long as he is."

The quiet determination of the tone stirred Hampton's admiration despite himself.

"You ought to be on the Royal Northwest Mounted," he laughed. "You have the same stick-to-the-trail doggedness."

"I was with 'em," was the unexpected reply. "Five years ago. Up in Alberta. Too much snow. Too much horse. Too lonesome. But I know what stickin' on the trail means, yeah. This here stuff is nothin' but play, lined up alongside of some things I seen."

The simple statement was a revelation to Douglas. Bill of Brooklyn, if left to himself, would have quit in disgust before now. But Ward, former R. N. W. M. P., would never abandon his quest until officially called in—or unofficially shot. He would imperturbably stick until the coming of the snows should make it impossible for any one to carry food to Steve without leaving a trail. And with the laying of that trail he would run his man to earth in no time. The sky suddenly looked very black for Steve.

But the blond man strove to keep his thoughts out of his face, and after a few more words he passed on, cudgeling his brain for some means of helping the fugitive to evade the remorseless power creeping closer and closer to his covert. A number of ways had previously occurred to him, but none of them was feasible in view of Steve's own refusal to leave his native environment, his determination to die first "like a wolf—into the rocks or the trees." Against that immovable decision what could he do? Nothing.

Nothing except the thing he now was trying to do—corner Snake Sanders. If cornered, Sanders might possibly be forced to clear Steve. The hope was slim, but still there was a chance—*if* he could corner Sanders! The thought revolved on itself and maddened him with its futility. The man Sanders was still eluding him, and, despite Ward's nonchalance, undoubtedly was evading the officers also. And the tell-tale snow which must reveal Steve's refuge might come at any time now.

Through Marion, he knew that the earth-bound boy had fought off his lung-pains and was somewhat stronger, though by no means well. For the present, therefore, he was not worrying over the youth's condition. In fact, he had asked himself a couple of times why he should take so deep an interest in the fellow anyway; then he had left the question unanswered, merely telling himself that "the poor kid's in hard luck, and he'd do as much for me—maybe." He had not faced squarely the fact that the basic motive for his sympathy was his desire to aid the girl.

He had seen her several times since the death of the ha'nt, but only for short

periods. Her mother, he learned, still was bitter against him, and—as perhaps might have been expected from one of her type—persisted in putting on him some of the blame for the death of her "man." Marion herself, though frankly asserting that she had no patience with such an attitude, was pensive and rather reserved in manner. Therefore he refrained from unnecessary calls.

She had asked him, of course, about his success in hunting the ha'nt; indeed, she had shown unmistakable relief when he rambled into her yard the next day to ask whether Spit had reached home all right. In pursuance of his decision to keep hidden for the present the annihilation of Dalton's Death, he had answered evasively, telling her truth but not all of the truth: that Spit had torn madly about in an effort to escape, that the door had swung open later on and the cat had run out, that he himself had tired of watching and fallen asleep on his blankets.

"And you can see for yourself," he had concluded, "that nothing gobbled me."

And since then he had been steadily seeking Sanders. He had changed his hunting-ground now from the vicinity of Snake's shack to a section nearer his own house—the long wall of Dickie Barre. Thither he had been led by an idea of his own, and there he worked day after day with a grim persistence equalling that of Ward and Bill, coupled with a methodical thoroughness which they might well have emulated.

The germ of his idea was the recollection of his first meeting with Steve and of Marion's production of the jug which, she said, belonged to Snake. She had not gone far that morning to get that jug. So, starting from the well-remembered crack among the boulders where his camp had been, he now delved into every crevice and cavern within a radius of a few minutes' traveling time from that focal point.

He found snakes, but none with legs. In one gloomy passage way leading inward he was halted by a rustle among leaves just ahead. His ears telling him that the sound was too slight to be made by stealthily moving feet, he hazarded the light of a match—and found himself in a den of copperheads. The deadly reptiles had abandoned the well-watered lower lands and sought higher ground to bed themselves down for the coming winter, and now they lay in a sluggish knot, nearly buried among the leaves. Their lifted heads and unwinking stare, however, showed that they were by no means too numb to attack; and Douglas, though well booted to the knee, had no desire to tread among them. Moreover, the presence of the reptiles and the untrodden appearance of the leaves virtually proved that no man was beyond. Wherefore he withdrew.

In other recesses farther north he found, at times, evidence of the occasional visits of men, clandestine or otherwise; the mute testimony of charred fagots and smutted stone, of scrapes on rock and of indentations showing that weighty things had stood for some time in certain spots. These traces, however, all indicated bygone activities, not recent occupancy. Whatever had been carried on in those crevices and *culs-de-sac*, both the equipment and the products now had vanished. Whether the evanishment was due to the fact that the Law still prowled about was a question which did not concern the silent hunter. He was looking for a man, one man; and, not finding that man or his lair, he moved on without delay.

Then came an unexpected impetus to his search. One afternoon, as he was threading his way around a bulk of detritus which obviously contained no opening, a drab figure detached itself from a massive tree-trunk near at hand. He looked into the foxy face of the little cooper, David McCafferty.

"Jest a-layin' for a couple o' squir'ls," Davy explained his presence. "Havin' any luck?"

"Not yet. I'm hunting—snakes."

A shrewd nod and a glance around followed. In a hoarse whisper the barrel-maker informed him:

"I hearn ther's a bad one—wust one round here—been seen down 'long here a piece. Mebbe 'bout haff a mile or so down. I dunno nothin' 'bout it. But ther' might be somethin' into it."

With another quick look around, he retreated to his tree. Douglas, without trying to render unwanted thanks, waved a hand and went on. A little later he heard behind him two roaring gunshots, and hoped Davy had bagged both his squirrels.

He did not, however, swing away through the woods for an estimated half-mile and there resume his conning of the crags. Davy's directions had been too indefinite,

and he was determined not to leave an unexplored gap in his steadily lengthening line. His system was to cover as much ground as he could in each short day, leave some sort of marker at the point where twilight compelled him to cease, then return to that marker the next morning and do another section. Thus, though his progress through the welter of stone was necessarily slow, he was making it absolutely sure. And now he held himself to the deliberate course he had set.

When the dusk descended he had laboriously made certain that Sanders' hide-hole, if he had one along here, was somewhere to the north of a buttress-jut beside which he had stopped. After fixing that outcrop firmly in memory and lightly blazing a couple of beech saplings with his pocket-knife for reassurance the next morning, he swung down through the brush to the road and home to his cheerless house.

"Ho-hum!" he yawned over his after-supper pipe. "I'm beginning to sympathize with Ward. Hunting down a man in this old Indian stronghold is real work. If it weren't for Davy's tip today I'd begin to think Snake was dead somewhere, like Nigger Nat. But there's no such luck. Well, Snake, maybe tomorrow night I'll know more about you."

The vague hope was to become terrible truth. Tomorrow night he would know much more about Snake Sanders—including something which would stagger the entire Traps.

CHAPTER XXV

NINETY-NINE'S MINE

HAMMERLESS HAMPTON stood very still.

Once more he was among the rocks. But these grotesque bulks around him were new; he never had penetrated into this group before. In fact, but for his careful observation of every opening he would not be here now. He had spied a hole in what seemed to be the solid precipice, beyond which showed light instead of the usual gloom. Crawling through, he had found himself in a big space, whose existence was concealed by the false face of the cliff. It was one of the freaks of the long-vanished glaciers, perhaps, moving outward a long line of solid stone and leaving beyond it a big gouge in the real butte. At any rate, it was queer.

But this was not what held Douglas so quiet; he had long since ceased to marvel at the fantastic formations along his line of exploration. Now, after passing among a number of small boulders—that is, no larger than a three-room house—he stood beside a hole opening downward. And beside that hole lay several charred matches.

In his mind those tiny stubs loomed larger than the long wall itself. Some man had been here quite recently; at some time since the latest rain, which would have pelted those cylindrical sticks down along the sloping stones on which they lay. And that man was no hunter, for no hunter would ever bother to enter this barren box. Indeed, no hunter would even find it, for he would be scanning ground and branches, not the naked rock-face.

Warily the discoverer glanced at the corners of the surrounding stones. No spying eye met his; no half-hidden head moved. He looked down again at the opening.

It was a hole made by the uptilting of a once horizontal slab. It was near the true face of the butte. At some time, perhaps not long distant, a mass of overhanging stone had crashed down from above, a jutting segment striking this slab at one end and angling the other end upward and aside by the force of impact. Before then, the horizontal block had been a sort of trap-door, concealing the cavity beneath. Now, plain to any eye which should reach this place, the opening revealed a few flat stones leading downward, markedly resembling crude stairs.

Across Hampton's face shot a sudden startled look—the astounded incredulity of a skeptic beholding in solid actuality a thing which he had believed to be mere legend. For minutes he stood as if hypnotized by the gloom below. Then, recovering himself, he stepped very quietly into a position where he could obtain a more direct view of the descent.

He saw little more. The steps vanished into the blackness of a vault. What lay beyond could be determined only by exploration. Exploration meant light; and, barring the few matches he always carried, he had no means of illumination. Moreover, he felt issuing from the depths a draft which probably would kill the feeble match-flames before they could reveal anything worth seeing. He must

return to the house and bring up his gas-lamp.

But then, moving again, he caught a glint from down the steps—a glint of metal. Logic told him that the other man who came here must have used those matches in lighting a lantern. If that faintly shining thing down there was it, then the man must be away at present. He stole closer, straining his eyes—then stepped boldly forward. There was little doubt now that he saw the circular top of a cheap oil lantern, and he believed he could also make out the dull-colored wire bail.

With some difficulty he folded himself up enough to crouch under the tilted lid and begin descent. After a couple of steps he could move more easily, and by the time he reached the lantern he was erect again. Lifting the lantern, he shook it and frowned. The light swash at the bottom told him that the oil was almost exhausted.

If a large cave lay beyond, he would have to be careful not to go too far from the entrance. Left lightless, he might find himself in a desperate plight. Even as the thought passed through his mind there came to his ears a faint gurgle of subterranean waters. Yes, he must watch his step, and his flame too. But he would see what he could.

Two matches were extinguished by the damp draft as he sought to light the blackened wick. The third, however, communicated its flame to the oily weave, and the snapping down of the sooty chimney preserved the dim shine within. Unlike the owner of the lantern, Douglas did not leave his match-stubs where they fell. He gathered them up and dropped them into a pocket.

Gun ready, he stole on downward. There were perhaps a dozen more of the steps, not one of which was truly horizontal; all sloped in one direction or another, and no two were of the same height. Some were so poorly balanced that they rocked under him, and all evidently had been piled in by unskilled human hands, long ago. But Douglas, cat-footed from his daily experiences among the boulders, passed down them as easily as if they had been a marble staircase constructed by expert workmen. They terminated in a down-grade of damp, hard earth.

The passage led on, narrow but fairly straight, for quite a distance. All at once it broadened out. At the same time the blackness became noticeably less dense. Faintly, here and there, showed grim rock walls—mere patches of stone, vague in he farther gloom, revealed by wan daylight filtering through some crevices high up and opening eastward. Simultaneously the hollow gurgle of the running water increased in volume. It sounded somewhere beyond.

A moment Douglas stood there, straining his eyes, seeing little. The dim lantern-light seemed to hinder rather than to help, preventing his pupils from dilating to the full width which might have brought more of the place into view. He felt an impulse to extinguish it. But it would go out of its own accord all too soon; perhaps if he did blow out the flame the wick would refuse to take a new light. He let it burn, and began moving about.

Before he moved far, however, he retraced his steps and spread his handkerchief on the uneven floor. Three corners of the cloth he folded in to the center, leaving the fourth protruding in a white angle toward the entrance. With this marker in place he advanced again, watching the dirt for any yawning crack, pausing to look around, then resuming his way. After a little while he reached the farther wall, having found nothing. There he halted.

The light-crevices were plain enough now—mere cracks in the stone, back whence he had come, from twenty to thirty feet up. Off to his left sounded the rumbling of the water: an eery, gruesome noise unlike the gentle murmur of Coxing Kill; a gargling and choking, as if some inhuman monster were gulping at an unseen Styx. Before he could decide whether to go and look at it, something to the right caught and held his gaze—a shadowy, shapeless thing which gave the impression of solidity but not of stone. He worked toward it.

As he approached, it took on form and outlines—a confusion of ancient timbers and rock-chunks which seemed to be a tumble-down furnace, or something of the kind. Just what it might have been he could not determine at once: but it certainly was a work-place, and very old.

His toes stubbed on something. The lantern proved the obstruction to be the remains of a heavy hammer, half-eaten away by rust. As he moved again, his lantern-light glinted dully on metal not far

from the ruined forge—if forge it was. His interest quickened. Metal not dimmed by rust—what was it?

Stepping toward it, he stumbled again. A heavy, dull-colored obstacle on the dirt had blocked his feet. It was not especially large, but it certainly was solid, as his tingling toes testified. It seemed to be a rudely shaped bar of metal. And it was not rusty.

"Great guns!" he breathed. "Is it true? Silver? Tarnished silver?"

As he stared at it, it began to grow dim. Was it about to vanish into the ground like a legendary treasure? No, it was not sinking; it was still there; but——

The light was going out.

The little flame had shrunk. It still was shrinking. Angrily he shook the lantern. A thin—very thin—slosh of oil answered him. There was still a little fuel—enough to last several minutes, at least. But the wick must be short.

The shaking gave a brief respite. The flame revived a trifle, feeding on the oil-dregs thrown on the wick. Swiftly he stepped toward the glimmering thing he had first seen. It was on the floor, and beside it rose a number of those solid bars, piled like wood. It was a tin can, recently emptied.

After one glance at it he pushed rapidly on toward the outer wall, determined to see as much as possible by the last light in the lantern. He found still more of those bars, and, beyond them, something made much more recently: a thick, comfortable bed of leaves, on which lay open a coarse, dirty quilt. Beside this, at what seemed to be the head of the primitive couch, and within easy reach of a man resting there, stood a big jug. Somehow it looked familiar. Its nozzle was plugged with a stout corn-cob, and—yes, on one side was an old smear of green paint!

"Thought so," nodded Douglas.

Memory was depicting a bygone morning among the rocks to the south; a red-haired girl, a gaunt-faced youth, a jug which the girl declared to be the property of Snake Sanders—a jug bearing the same green splotch. Its presence here was conclusive evidence.

All was growing dusky again. The light was going for the last time. It was no longer a flame, but a mere sunken line, turning blue; and from the spent wick rose a warning reek. With a shake that made the foul globe chatter angrily within its wires, he turned and gripped one of the cold metal bars. For its size, it was astoundingly heavy. He had meant to carry it under one arm, but its sullen weight and clammy slipperiness forced him to hug it in both. With bar and gun both cradled across his body and lantern dangling crazily from one finger, he moved for the exit.

It seemed to be nearer than he had thought. The last flickers of the expiring light revealed a black gouge in the wall. Into it he turned, muttering to the lantern: "All right, quit! I don't need you any more."

The overworked wick did quit, leaving him in utter blackness. Half a dozen more steps he took, watching for the first vague dayshine from beyond. Then he halted as if petrified. He remembered his handkerchief. And he remembered that he had not seen it on turning in here.

Carefully he lowered his burden. With hands free, he struck a match.

"Wow! You can back-track, Mister Man!" he muttered.

Less than a yard ahead opened a wide rift in the floor. One more step in the dark would have trapped him in a pit where death, swift or slow, would inevitably have obliterated him; death from the fall, from starvation, or from Snake Sanders' merciless hands.

"Yes, you can back-track," he repeated. "Wouldn't Snake have a lovely afternoon with you if he found you in there, all busted up? He'd drop in a few of his squirmy chums to keep you company, most likely, and have the time of his life watching the show. And if he didn't find you, nobody else ever would. Now use your brains, Hamp, if you have any, and find the right way out."

Conning the situation, he realized that the most important feature was saving matches, of which he had very few. Therefore he groped until he had located bar, gun, and lantern; gathered them up, turned carefully, and felt his way back by keeping an elbow against the rough wall of the false passage. When the stone ended he halted again, laid down everything, lighted another fire-stick, and, carefully shielding the flame from draft, advanced to the left. As he walked he counted his steps.

Three matches in turn burned out. The

third, however, brought him within sight of a white splotch several feet to his left. The fourth proved it to be his pointer.

He now had only two matches left. But he knew the number of steps, including the turn he had made toward his handkerchief: he had the vague crevice-lights to aid his calculations for the return, and he had approximately the right direction in mind. Deducting from his total count the few steps taken on the last angle, and concentrating every sense into the task of traveling straight, he marched back through the darkness. So true was his course that with the last step his foot struck the invisible lantern.

Once more loaded, he sought the exit, saving both matches. But his steps were a trifle shorter now that he was burdened, and he also strayed a little from his line. It took both matches to set him right at the end; the second was almost out before he could even see the white, and before he could reach the marked spot the light was gone. However, he found the opening in the wall; and when he went groping along the passage he had retrieved his handkerchief. The only traces of his visit now were the last two match-butts, which he had had to drop.

The wan light of day had seldom been so welcome as when, after a scraping, stumbling journey, he emerged at length at the crude staircase. With a long breath of relief, he clambered up to the step whereon he had found the lantern. There he replaced the grimy light-giver on the exact spot where he had discovered it. On upward he continued, and out from under the tilted lid he crept.

No new sign of human presence was visible outside. He strode around the nearest boulder. Behind its sheltering bulk he laid down his bar of loot and began close inspection of it.

With his clasp-knife he scraped away an accumulation of dark sediment, baring a narrow strip of the true metal. From the clean space shone a dull silvery gleam.

"By thunder!" he breathed. "Sure as shooting, it's— But wait, now. Let's see."

He dug the point of the strong blade into the metal. Turning it, he easily cut out a conical chunk. After scanning it an instant, he pressed his thumb-nail down on one circular edge. The nail bit out a clean gouge. For a couple of seconds more he stared at the little plug of metal, at his knife-blade, at his nail and the end of his thumb. Then he lifted his head and laughed—silently, but so heartily that tears came to his eyes.

He knew now what it was that the long-dead Ninety-nine had dug from the bowels of that shadowy cavern; what it was that the Indian who sought the aid of old Elias Fox had borne away from the mine; what the old man's sly glimpse had depicted as virgin silver, and what his son and grandsons since had sought until crushing doom annihilated one of them. His laughter ended as he eyed the great block whose fall from above had pried up the stone trap-door. That might be the very mass which had hurtled down on Will Fox. Under it even now might be lying his splintered bones.

Dubiously he eyed the cliff above, half-dreading another such fall. But there was no overhang of stone now, no danger of another drop. He let his thoughts run back again.

Long ago he had perceived the flaw in the tradition that "where the sun first strikes the wall, there is the mine." The sun, moving north or south with the changing seasons, would cast its first beams on different points of the wall at varying times of year. Even when he had climbed the Mohonk slope to see the sun rise he had been aware of this; and since then he had relegated the whole story to the realm of myths. Yet the mine was real enough, and he had found it at last; and, through his good-humored promise to Lou Brackett, part of it belonged to her.

But Snake, Lou's own man, had found it before him. This was why he had been so elusive of late; this was where he had been most of the time, evading all eyes and perhaps working to get more mineral from the vein. Was it likely that he would share his secret with Lou? Hardly. Perhaps he intended soon to drive her from him, and hoped—the thinker's face hardened—hoped with his new-found wealth to gain possession of Marion.

The thought brought him to his feet. Where was Snake now? What was he doing? Was all well down below? But then, as if in answer, arose the vision of glacial gray eyes and ominously quiet words—

"Pop's gun—I got it ready—if Snake

comes a-pesterin' round he won't never walk outen our yard!"

The self-reliant girl was well able to defend herself. He need not worry. But he began moving away, leaving behind him the soft silvery bar. One last glance he threw at it, and a hard smile twitched his lips.

"It was a treasure in Indian days," he thought, "and I haven't a doubt that you, Snake, you ignorant reptile, think you're a coming silver-king. But you'll never make much money out of those few bars of lead!"

CHAPTER XXVI

SNAKE STRIKES

"SNAKE SANDERS has kilt his woman!" Aghast, Douglas stood in his dark doorway, staring down into the upturned face of Marion. Around them the dusk was thickening into night, and in the shadow of his porch it was dim indeed; but through the gloom the eloquent gray eyes and the hushed voice spoke the same shocked horror, pity, and wrath that stirred in his own soul.

"Killed her? Killed Lou Brackett?" he repeated slowly.

"Yes. She ain't dead yet, but she can't live long. Poor woman, it'd been a lot better for her if she'd missed that tree—she wouldn't be sufferin' now. But then, there wouldn't be a proof against him if she had. Where you been all day? You must be the only one into the Traps that ain't heard. I was down here twice—I wanted to tell you so's you'd look out. They ain't caught Snake yet, and he might—well, you better watch out."

She turned, sweeping the darkling road with her eyes. Nothing moved there. No sound came, except the doleful sigh of a cold night breeze.

"Come in." He moved back. "I want to know all about this. The fire's going—I was just getting supper. Come in and keep warm."

For an instant she hesitated, instinctively dreading entrance into the sinister house where her father and Jake Dalton had met nameless doom. But then, realizing that Douglas had lived here for weeks without harm, she followed him in. Her moving feet made an unwonted noise on the boards—the patter of leather-heeled shoes, which the gnawing chill had at last compelled her to don. The somber echo of the sound in the bare room halted her again.

"Ain't you got a light?" she requested. "I—I don't like this place, so dark and holler."

"I'll light up. Take this chair."

The one chair in the place came rumbling toward her, and she sank on it as he worked on the lamp. When the white flame was lighting up the room he set the illuminator on the table and turned to her, neglecting to draw the burlap window-curtains which he had made some time ago.

"I was up in the rocks all day," he explained. "Found something, too, that may help to catch Snake. But now tell me all about it."

"Well, this is what I hear, and it's what Lou said her own self after she got so's she could talk. Snake took her up on top the Big Wall last night and throwed her off——"

"Good God! Threw her off the Wall?"

"That's right. Snake ain't been to home much lately—you know that—but he's come in a few times, and then he was so ugly to her she dasn't go lookin' round to find out where he was when he was away. He told her if she stepped a foot away from the house he'd know about it, and he'd fix her so's she wouldn't be able to walk or talk any more, and if anybody come a-huntin' him she'd got to say she didn't know where he was, and so on. But last night he come in 'long towards dark, and he was laughin' fit to kill. And he said he'd got an awful good joke onto the detectives.

"She asked him what 'twas, of course, and he wouldn't tell her. But he said he'd show her if she'd hurry up to the top of the Wall. He said the detectives had got into the rocks down under the Wall, and when she could see what they were up to she'd 'most die laughin'. But she'd have to come and see it her own self.

"Well, Lou, she—she ain't very bright, you know. And she was so glad to see him good-natured and so curious about this joke onto the detectives, she went right 'long up there with him. And he went right to the edge and looked round a little, and then he says. 'There! See 'em, right up under here? It's a-gittin' dark down there, but look close and you'll make 'em out. Ain't that funny, now?'

"Lou, she couldn't see anything but rocks. But he kept a-tellin' her she was too far back, so she edged up closer and closer,

still a-lookin'. Then all of a sudden she heard Snake laugh again, and he had sneaked behind her, and that laugh scairt her. She looked round quick, and he was grinnin' like death. And before she could move he shoved her off. The murderin' copperhead! He'd brought her up there jest to kill her."

Her fingers, twining and intertwining over one knee while she talked, gripped hard. Unable longer to sit still, she sprang up.

"D'you know where he is? If you do, git him quick! Lou wasn't a friend to me—she hated me—but he's got to be kilt for what he done! He——"

"Go on," he broke in. "Tell me all of it. Then I'll see what we can do."

"Yes—yes, that's right. Well, Lou would have been kilt right quick, only for one thing. There was a tree part way down, growin' right off the face of the wall, the way they do sometimes—a hemlock, stickin' out on a slant. And Lou struck right into it. She was fallin' awful fast, and she hit it so hard it—it hurt her terrible; and the tree tore off from the little ledge, and it went 'long down with her. She landed into the rocks, of course. But that tree had stopped her enough so that the rocks didn't kill her.

"She laid there a long time, and when she got her senses back it was all dark. But then a light showed right close by, and what d'you s'pose she saw? Snake! Snake, with an ax into one hand and a lantern into the other, a-lookin' for her!

"He must have seen that tree stop her, and he'd come down through the Gap and worked 'long through the rocks to be sure she was dead. He was a-callin' to her, and sayin' he'd help her, and so on. But she kept dead still. She was into a shadow beside one of the rocks, and he went right by her. She never moved till he quit lookin' and come back, swearin' at her and the dark and everything. And then when she was sure he was gone, she started crawlin'."

She stopped again, her hands clenched. Douglas, visioning that awful scene at the base of the night-bound crags, stood with jaw set. Presently she resumed the tragic narrative.

"I dunno how she could do it, but she did—she crawled down through the rocks and over pretty near to the road. It took her more'n half the night to do it—it was 'most two o'clock into the mornin' when they found her. She couldn't git any further, and she laid there a-cryin' and a-screamin'. Oh, why does God let a devil like Snake live? Seems like He ain't much good to let such things be!

"But anyway, there was two fellers out coon-huntin', and the dogs had run a coon up that way, and they found Lou. It was Tom Malley and Joe Weeks—they live 'way 'long on the Paltz road, and they'd drove up this way to hunt. They went and got their wagon and put Lou in and took her down to the Malley place, and while Tom's folks did what they could he put for the doctor, 'way over to Paltz. The doctor, he says she might live a few days, but that's all. She's awful tough, like all the Bracketts—they die hard. But she can't live; she's hurt too bad."

"And she was able to tell about it?"

"Yes, a little to a time. And Missus Malley, Tom's wife, she was sharp enough to have it all wrote down. There's quite a family of 'em, the Malleys, and the oldest boy is quick at writin', folks say; and she made him set there by the bed and write down every word Lou said. The doctor said that was a right smart thing to do, and the detectives said so too. They didn't have to ask her——"

"The detectives? Did they go down there?"

"One of 'em did. T'other stayed here. They're both here now. Tom Malley was so mad he drove up here this mornin' and told everybody he come across about it, and he met the detectives, and one of 'em went back with him—the quiet one that don't look so much like a bulldog."

"Ward. He's the brains of the combination. And I suppose nobody else around here is doing anything but talk about it."

"Ain't they? You're the only one, Mister Hammerless Hampton, that ain't! Our fellers are kind of rough, mebbe, some of 'em, but they don't set still after a thing like this! Every gun into the Traps is out after Snake, 'ceptin' yours and mine. And mine's been waitin' for him ever since pop got kilt."

"So has mine," he reminded her. "What are the boys doing?"

"They're a-watchin' every way out of the Traps. They know he ain't gone—they 'most caught him this afternoon, up to his house. He didn't know about Lou bein' alive and found, I s'pose, and he was gittin' his stuff together as if he was goin' somewheres—gun and food and oil and so on—

What would he want oil for, I wonder? Anyway, he skinned out of a back winder when they jumped in at the door. Job Clark shot at him, but he missed, and Snake got into the woods and they lost him. But the house is bein' watched now, and so's every road and trail. He's got his gun, though, and if you're a-goin' to stay in tonight you'd better lock up tight. He might come and git you. And now I'd better go home."

"Wait. I'll go along with you. But let me figure on this thing first."

For a silent minute or two he fixedly regarded the blank wall. As steadily, she watched him. Soon he nodded.

"That's the best way," he said, half to himself. "I'd like to get him single-handed, but if he should get me instead—nobody else would know where he was hanging out. Yep, I'll take some of the boys with me."

Turning his gaze to her, he announced decisively:

"By tomorrow noon Snake will be dead or in a trap he can't squirm out of. I found his hole today, and as soon as daylight comes I'll get some of the fellows together and we'll bottle him up. No use trying it tonight—I couldn't find the place myself in the dark. But if all the trails are watched he can't go anywhere else, and getting him will be easy. All we have to do is to sit around like a bunch of terriers watching a rat-hole, and when he comes out—nothing to it!"

"Where? Where is it?" she demanded. "Are you sure it's his place? Mebbe—mebbe some of the boys——"

"No, it's none of the boys," he smiled. "The boys have cleaned up all their places lately—hid everything somewhere, so the detectives wouldn't see too much if they went poking around. And I know this is Snake's place because his jug is there—green paint on one side—remember? I'll tell you all about it some other time. But now—say, here's an idea! I'll try to get those detectives both up there, and while we know where they are you go to Steve and try to make him leave that cold hole of his and find a better place. If he wants to make a run for it and leave the Traps awhile, nobody'll stop him——"

A shake of the head negatived his budding plan.

"He won't run, and he won't change, and he won't listen to sense," she declared. "He's more set and wild than ever now. He's got to git Snake, he says, 'fore somebody else does. I hadn't ought to told him, mebbe. But I did tell him—I went to him jest now and told him 'bout Lou and all. I jest got back from there—I ain't even been home yet. I wish I'd kept still. He's crazy as a coot. He swore he'd come out and git Snake his own self, detectives or no detectives, and he'd take pop's gun to do it with. I had an awful time quietin' him down. He's sick again, too—his lung's bad some more."

"Good Lord! Sick again?"

"Yes, sick again. He looks awful bad. I dunno if he— But I'd better git 'long home. He's so wild about Snake he might come and git that gun, sick or no sick."

"But you said you quieted him down."

"Mebbe I did. I hope so. I told him he couldn't have that gun 'cause I had to have it my own self, and that made him shut up. But he wouldn't promise to stay where he was—he wouldn't say 'yes' or 'no' or nothin'. And he's so bull-headed when he gits his mind set, he might— Well, I'm a-goin'. G'by."

As she turned doorward, he stopped her with a swiftly formed decision.

"Just a minute more, Marion. I'm going with you, as I said before; and I'm going to stay. My job tonight is going to be standing guard at your house. Then you and your mother can get a good sound sleep. It isn't Steve I'm thinking about—it's Snake. If he intends to call on anybody tonight it's more likely to be on you than on me. So if you don't mind my sitting on your steps——"

The sentence never was finished. Nor was the plan ever carried out.

As Douglas turned to step toward his hat, coat, and gun, the front door jumped inward.

Snake Sanders, shotgun leveled at his hip, evil face aflame, stood in the room.

TO BE CONTINUED

Author of "The Last Wolf," "A Man's Best Dog," etc.

FELIS CONCOLOR, the tranquil, lived at the corner of the Green-timber Range and the Wasting Hills. His den looked into the slopes of Shattered Valley, toward the far-away Mirage Flats. He was a big cat whose need of a wide reach was met by the wilderness about him, where he walked with sleek grace and supple power.

As a cougar, Felis was a success. He was past nine feet long from the crinkling of his sensitive nose to the unresting tip of his tail. From his backbone, buttressed by the rounds of his shoulder-blades, to the pads of his forepaws he gave the effect of a beefy brute, his body was so deep, his legs so large and powerful. His flanks were lean, his hips long, and at intervals he drew back his lips, showing his slender white teeth; at other intervals he drew back the sheaths that covered his claws, and showed those beautifully polished hooks, developed like the eagle's talons for taking hold.

The den was a dark mass of overhanging rock, where a prehistoric spring had dripped for ages in an intruded vein, carrying away raw metals by force of carbonic acid in raindrops, and then washing out the residue of insoluble stone in trickles of sandy water. The spring eventually had found a shorter way into the alkali flats and left the ancient subterranean run as a cavern of several chambers, narrow passages and smooth surfaces, which now became solid comfort and convenience at the service of the lone brute.

Curious marks on the wall, like step-ladders or animals or even stubby little men, indicated former occupation by creatures of a certain intellectual development. Smoke-stains, too, were plainly visible in places; but the bones, the litter, the things dried and crumbling which had accumulated during ages on the floors and in the recesses, would have puzzled a cultured race as reading-matter. With the past perhaps Felis Concolor had no concern whatever, except that he had inherited this splendid retreat.

There were several approaches to the den. Two came from above and down a precipitous slope. One led diagonally up, demanding leaps and sureness of jumping judgments. A fourth, consisting of the most meager of claw-holds, ascended an almost utterly impracticable steep of rock, whose face was merely rough and cracked. This was seldom used by the resident dignitary, though he had not failed to discover it, during hours when he stretched, in warm Autumnal sunshine, on one or another of the several favorable places afforded by stone in its countless manifestations of form and surface.

Concolor purred in his enjoyment of the solid comforts of his wilderness abode. He would bask himself for hours with the sunshine straining through his hairy brows, apparently too lazy to turn his head away, with just the faintest betrayal of his annoyance in the manner in which he twisted

"Lonesome," copyright, 1923, by Raymond S. Spears

his ear-muscles, drew down his eyelids, and waved his long and beautiful mustache.

Yet he would not rise and turn around on his bed of polished, undulating stone, nicely calculating that the exertion required would be greater than the modicum of annoyance which would be abated; and, too, doubtless he figured that if he turned around, something else would bother him in his new position, as for example a blue-bottle fly or a grass-tip which he would have to bite off, or even that a lump in the stone, which he couldn't bite off or abate, would press through his sleek fur and intrude upon his breast-bone or the sensitive bone of his elbow. He was old enough to know that perfect comfort untouched by some slight exasperation does not exist.

His domain was extensive. Toward the sunrise, mountains clambered in ridges and benches, spurs and backs, to blue heights above belts of dark shades of upright timber grown from roots penetrating masses of broken stone. Greentimber Range was a lower crest that loomed against the vaster heights which caught the first rays of morning sunshine.

Wasting Hills were rounded knobs that extended toward the Mirage Flats of pale alkali, along the north side of Shattered Valley to the arid lake of chemical concentrates. On the hills the trees grew more scattering, the juniper-trees changed from splotches to spots, and finally at the approach to the flats, even sage-bushes diminished to mere trifles of stunted vegetation amid acreages of color, sunshine and shadows of lumps in a largess of varied expansiveness.

Concolor strolled forth from his grand height of castellated masses of stone, entering the forest of his domain, and raised his nose to catch the odor of what might first tempt his appetite. Gums, woods in all stages from stalwart leafage to dank change of humus, touched the delicately adjusted filaments of his nostrils. He reached to nip a leaf that pampered his nose with an invitation for its attention.

Those woods cast countless scents upon the breezes. Among the rest were some that increased his desire to eat. Mice, little birds, squirrels—he turned baleful green eyes and followed the rapid departure of an agile, very much alarmed little beast which had suddenly discovered the approach of the monarch.

Concolor wrinkled his nose. Certainly a squirrel would taste good; but this squirrel was going—gone; and besides, such a trifle would be but a taste.

A rabbit track was more to the point. For the moment, having nothing more in view, the cougar walked along the rabbit runway, his body twisting and his paws feeling as they reached. What his whisker-ends touched his body curved around, passing just clear with a nicety of instinctive calculation; or when twig-ends were too close together to be wholly evaded, he eased among them, so that they dragged noiselessly along his sides and then swung back to their natural hang with the minimum of displacement and disturbance.

His disgust was great when he found that the rabbit had gone into a hole whose bottom he could not reach, and whose wedged stones and caked earth indicated the futility of trying to dig down to the warm and palpitating morsel his nose could smell, his ears hear, but his claws could not unearth. He crouched on the earth as if to wait for the animal to emerge, but thought better of it.

A furry thing darted past him, and he snapped with incredible quickness as he saw it. He felt something between his lips and tongue, in his teeth. Carefully he put it on the ground and planted a paw on one tiny end. He looked at it, smelled it, then licked it up with his tongue again.

He looked around with his head just a little lower than usual. Perhaps he was a trifle ashamed of himself, nine feet of pliant cat engaging in the capture of two inches, not counting the tail, of a dark-brown woods mouse.

He strode along more rapidly, going up the wind. He climbed to a ridge back, stepped into an ancient deer runway and followed it with noiseless care. He found day-old trails, which promised little sustenance. He turned down to where there was a spring of water. Here he drank moderately. He followed along the streamlet, came to a marshy swamp of small size, walked around the edge, taking precious care to keep his paws dry, and approached the beaver dam which created a pond there. He found where trees had been recently cut; but the beaver were in mid-pond, where cougars do not attack them. It is a messy job anyhow to catch beavers unless they are away from the water. Concolor hunted on,

leaving the disgusting muck, to search drier heights.

Luck was with him. A mountain hare came bounding down the slope with noisy thumps. Felis heard him a long way off and dropped to the ground with ears twitching, eyes searching, nose wrinkling, lips drawing back from teeth and claws emerging from their sheaths. All tense, patient and ready, Concolor lurked between a log and a boulder. The hare stopped to look back, waited a few seconds and then came bounding again. It came within fifteen feet of the lurking cougar, which gave a light bound and crushed the victim under both forepaws. Standing on the luckless victim, the cougar raised his head and looked to right and left. Then he sank softly and munched his capture with much contentment.

Later as he strolled along he saw a bird on a low branch; but when he sprang to seize it, missed by a yard, for it was a night-flier, an owl whose work was even quieter, even more stealthy than the big cat's finest efforts. The pique of disappointment turned the hunter down the grade toward the Wasting Hills. Night had fallen. He could emerge from the thick timber into the scattering of cedars without feeling that he was exposing his nakedness in the starlight.

Big game was to be had down in those scatterings of gloom and open spaces. He hesitated as he approached the feeble brutes whose soft meat was amply satisfying.

He knew the consequences of attacking them, however. If he killed a big calf or a heifer, there was sure to be an uproar around the corner of the Greentimber Range and the Wasting Hills. Humans would come with a pack of dogs, and they would scramble and rattle the wilderness and make a grand old hullabaloo—and if there was anything the cougar despised, it was tumult, agitation, confusion and noise. He hated above all things the scandalous dogs, brothers of the wolf-packs—and wolves!

The cougar sniffed, lowered his head and looked about uneasily. He didn't really have to be afraid of dogs, nor yet even of wolves, but they were exceedingly annoying. They came bounding, yelping, yapping at his heels, and they would nip him, which was insulting—but Felis Concolor was hungry.

Sure enough, the breeze brought him the warm scent of large meat. He crept from shade to shade among the junipers. He circled down-wind and worked up the slight breeze, saw dark shapes which moved clumsily about grazing on little tufts of bunch brass; and, having found one of the animals at a distance from the others, he walked in upon the stupid brute, bided his time and then with two light springs and a jump, landed on the back of the victim before it threw up its head.

With his right forepaw Concolor caught the heifer over the head, hooking in its eyes with his claws, and, kinking the neck, snapped the bones out of joint; and his meal fell quivering, dead instantly beneath him. The cougar snuffed and snarled hungrily into the dripping throat and fed to surfeit. He was always eating either too little or too much. Now he ate till his flanks swelled out taut and round. He ate himself sleepy.

At last, unable to eat any more, he dragged what remained a little way, to some dead cedar, covered it over with the sticks, and then heavily, languidly, retreated through the openings into the greentimber belt, where he curled down on the side-hill to go to sleep, stupefied by his gorge.

He slept the sun around. He awakened at last, stretched and yawned. He remembered his meat, cached out in the scattering of cedars. It was a good night to go walking, and he strolled down to his kill, the smell of which was in his nostrils long before he reached it. There was another odor, however, which he did not like. Some human had come that way, tainting the air. Concolor, however, was hungry enough to approach his cache, despite the disturbance.

Suddenly beneath his forepaw the earth opened up and jaws closed on his toes. He sprang, jerked, tumbled about and threw, with two claws in it, the trap that had been unskilfully placed. By failure to put a trip-stick for the paw to step over to insure its landing squarely on the trap pan, the man had lost his chance to stretch the hide of old Felis Concolor.

One fair swing of the cougar's paw had thrown the trap forty feet, drags and all, with two curved claws in it for mementoes. Concolor, in panic fright, now fled wildly up the steeps, up the forested slope, through the talus heaps of broken rock and shivered in the cavern of his farthest retreat. There, licking his injured paw, most sensitive of members, he growled, whined, snarled by

turns. He was hurt-sick, nerve-sick, and after a time hunger-sick too.

When he went forth again he kept himself hidden in the timber depths and hunted tiny mice morsels by the hour, feeling happy when he caught a rabbit; but he was so sore that he seemed unequal to the task of killing a deer; yet, having fed on the wilderness trifles, he ran at last upon a deer and killed it with less difficulty than catching an agile rabbit, for the young victim was neither cautious nor fortunate in discovering the approach of the slinking shadow of hunger in the feline figure.

He ate what he could and dragged the remnants of his victim to a fallen tree-top, where he buried it under brush. There he turned his back on his cache, returned into his den and sulked there, kept awake for hours by the ache of his hurt paw. When hunger assailed him, he resolutely went hunting again, keeping away from the kill which he had made. The trap had taught him a lesson which he did not need to learn twice.

THUS he lived, perhaps the loneliest of beasts. His meat-hunting required but little time. For the rest, he slept off his gorges, and he idled day after day, basking in the nearly constant sunshine, retreating from the cool night winds or frosts into his cavern. His shadow as he walked, his best-natured of purrs, startled and sent all manner of life, from tiny mice to the great deer, in abject flight, panic-stricken by the sleek efficiency of so huge and terrible a brute.

The time came when Concolor discovered his own misery. His hunger satisfied, he would walk in the forest aimlessly. By day his natural caution would make him stealthy and silent; in the night when coyote of the desert, owls of the forest canopy and elk of the peaks and points gave voice to their feelings, the cougar would raise his head, open wide his jaws and scream to such effect that where wilderness creatures had been noisy in their gossip silence fell; there was no answer when that long, ascending, throbbing screech and wail called to the tall timber, along the peaked rocks and down the gorges into the open valleys. Instead of answering, all manner of creatures shuddered where they listened; wolves drew away whimpering, deer bounded away in terror, birds on their roost trees shivered with helpless dread.

For all the small creatures Felis Concolor had only indifference or contempt. For the deer he had only an appetite. Bears he disliked for their burly swaggering strength and courage. Elk he longed to eat, but feared their horns and hoofs. A lone wolf did not matter to him; but when a pack came, barking, yapping, howling and snapping at his heels, Concolor snarled and fled to safety amid the dignity of tree-branches. He hated wolves, for they disturbed his self-respect.

Stricken by the longing that was worse than hunger, Concolor took to wandering far and swing wide from his den at the corner of Greentimber Range and the Wasting Hills. He climbed till he was above the timber-line; he descended till he was in the midst of scattered sage, where the alkali salts were irritating to his paws and made him thirst—and the water he found did not quench the thirst.

Thus he discovered a runway where menfolk traveled. He walked beside it in the quiet of night. He had walked in deer-trails, over passes where footpaths of many kinds of creatures converged into one, and he knew cattle tracks, cut deep and wide by heavy hoofs. The reeking man-tracks bespoke of dangerous, but interesting, creatures.

It was night. He was a lucky cougar. He heard a man coming. The man was in a lonely mood, too. At least he was making loud sounds. His voice rose and fell hoarsely, like the voice of a strong human.

The cougar dropped amid a tangle of sage, and with his lower jaw on his forelegs waited patiently. He was rewarded. The human was riding a horse, as humans do. He was swaying from side to side. He was whooping, wailing, shouting, yelling, all with a vehemence and energy that excited the admiration of old Concolor.

Oblivious to the audience, the man lounged by, his horse shacking along with head bobbing up and down. Suddenly the horse stiffened, bucked tentatively, and then surged ahead.

"Who-a-a-a!" the man yelled, swaying and jerking about violently; but the horse did not seem to mind.

The man accepted the situation, whooped with new energy, and with waving hat in the starlight, yelling and shouting, he rode away, rather pleased by the sudden accession of nerve and energy in his weary mount.

The cougar rose on his forelegs to sit on his haunches, watching the rapid, dusty departure. He was puzzled, not realizing that he had stopped upwind from the trail, and that the horse doubtless had caught his scent, warm from his sleek body—something to startle even the wakeful dreams of a desert mount with a drunken rider.

Concolor circled wide, killed a calf and, having gorged, went into strange country to sleep it off. When he returned to his den he was glad to be home again. He had met no friends. He had passed the time of day with no chance acquaintance. Yet he had found a kind of solace for his loneliness, which was worse than hunger.

By and by he returned again to the trail. Man tracks possessed a kind of fascination for him. The cries of mankind fell like pleasant music on the huge feline's ears. He recalled his sensations with a wish to enjoy them again. Accordingly he returned to the lonely mountain pass and lurked along it, being so eager that he did not wait for night, but with infinite caution and slowest of creepings ventured near the dangerously fascinating runway.

He was disappointed. He saw no one. He grew stomach-hungry, waiting for another human to ride by on horseback, singing in the broad day. None, came, even in the dark. Felis Concolor drew back and returned into the land of his huntings, where he caught rabbits, birds and other creatures till he was satisfied. Then he returned to the runway, patiently resuming his vigil.

He wanted friendship, or at least contact with creatures of his own size. Toward humans he felt a feeling of respect, sympathy, friendship even. He had no illusions regarding the danger of such a whim, but he took the chance because he was alone in those vast spaces, and if he called across them there was no voice to make answer.

Luck was with him after a time. He saw a fire in the midst of a valley. He approached it in the gloom. Juniper-trees were scattered on the back of a neighboring ridge. Stalking through these, Concolor arrived within listening distance of the fire.

He saw humans gathered around it, sitting down. It was a cedar limb-and-root fire. Within the circle of the light was a strange hulky thing which smelled variously—a chariot of the roads, which made much noise and traveled at bird-wing speed. These were tourists from afar.

Felis Concolor uttered a tentative cry. His voice floated into the wide, shallow basin. He saw every figure around the fire instantly straighten up and begin to act like a man.

He screamed again. He heard them utter exclamations, cries and whisperings. He wished they would make sounds like the rider who had passed that way on his horse some time since. Still, these sounds were a kind of response.

He called again. He saw the whole crowd scramble into the chariot, and a moment later he heard them shooting, spitting fire and throwing hissing things through the air. He knew the sound. Regretfully he withdrew, calling and crying as he retreated. He listened for tangible answer, but there was no welcome for him.

He returned into the mountains and walked in the green timber again. He was not disappointed, though he was far from satisfied. He had come down to humans, where they had their fire. The jeopardy had been considerable, and he accepted the rebuff. His loneliness was in a measure overcome by his dread of the stinging and deadly machinations with which humans destroyed whatever came within sight of them.

Wonderful killers, these humans! Felis Concolor had followed their tracks to many a sprawling victim. They killed prairie-dogs, hawks, rabbits and left them where they fell. They wounded deer which ran, dripping blood. Around their fireplaces it was commonplace to find scorched bones. Apparently they killed much, but used little.

Their sprawled victims were deadly, for around them the humans placed murdering traps that even wolves could not always avoid. And like wolves, humans often killed merely for fun.

Nevertheless the cougar returned to the runway of men where it led winding over the timbered pass down through the juniper belt in the direction of the bare, lower levels where they had their own den. Felis stalked along the trail, drawn irresistibly by the mystery of these careless, stalwart beings. Perhaps he even admired them.

He heard footsteps, and showed his teeth appreciatively. Humans didn't care who heard them! He saw the walker, a woman. She was up the slope from the trail, picking juniper berries in a clangorous tin pail.

She was Rose Stanley, from down at the dusty spaces of the Edem ranch. It had been her good fortune to escape alone to the junipers, which Toyab Edem would have objected to, had he known. Toyab could not understand why or how a young woman could prefer the timber-line without him, rather than with him hanging around. She had run away to avoid him.

Now, perfectly content, humming a low tune under her breath, she was joyou in the height and breadth of a vast and beautiful land. What lovelier place was there in the world than this, with its colors, its spaciousness, the glory of its sky, its mountains and its sweep of valley?

Then she met Felis Concolor, who issued forth noiselessly with cool, feline insolence and gazed at her reflectively only a jump distant, magnificently calm. Frozen by a presence so questionable, she stared at him gaze for gaze. She felt her lips parting as if to scream; but on the instant she realized that this in that land of vacancies would be in vain. She confronted him with utter courage.

His ears twitched; his tail curved and waved; his whiskers spread out almost comically; his eyes searched her; and when she looked fairly into their moon-green depths, she felt their inscrutable chill.

"What shall I do! What shall I do!" she whispered.

Then she heard the tawny brute purring, his lips parted, and something—an expression—in his face reassured her. His was not a vicious mood, nor was his attitude that of attack; no hunger was revealed in his well-filled lines; his mere presence was a bid for her most earnest attention; she began to edge and back away, and he knew the expression of her figure, the meaning of the lines of her gestures, which indicated that she was alarmed. Deer, rabbits, and other menaced creatures displayed the same timidity, the same urgent, shrinking departure.

His own doubts were dispelled, so that he felt more at ease. He walked with her at a harmless distance, yet nearly beside her. He suited his soft, gliding gait to her noisy foot-pattering.

For a time she scurried, but he was not to be outrun; she walked, and he kept pace; she sauntered, and he strolled with her; she stopped, and he posed like a beautiful statue. She stared at him, and he displayed his magnificent pride, gratified by her understanding.

"Kitty! Kitty!" she exclaimed, and then laughed aloud at her own absurdity—a kitten two hundred pounds in weight!

He purred louder than ever, for there was assurance and pleasure in that light staccato cry. There was greeting in her voice, and knowledge in her tone. She knew, now, his own feeling. He crinkled his nostrils, he lifted the corners of his lips, and he chortled his contentment, as his longing was assuaged by this meeting and companionship.

She leaned against a tree and talked to him, her voice pleasant. He saw her grow calm. He saw her draw a third eye from her belt, and as she leveled it at him he froze doubtfully. At the click and a flutter in that pale eye extended toward him, he sprang away in a start. The opacity of the third eye which she carried in her hands was different from her own bright blue eyes, whose shining and handsome depths were where they ought to be—in a human creature's head.

He walked with her for miles. They strolled among the junipers. They went down to the edge of the juniper belt, where the sage was alone amid the crumbling talus-slope débris.

There, at the open, the cougar hesitated. He stopped as the den of humans showed plain far down. He glanced at the horses and cattle scattered far and wide. She spoke to him, urged him, and then approached him. He purred, but retreated.

"Good kitty!" she said to him with her voice still pleasant; but he turned and made three magnificent, incredible, boastful bounds from the rock on which he had paused to look down upon that domain of humanity. He stopped among the cedars, looking back over his shoulders; and then, leaping, he retreated from her view heading away toward the higher mountains in the heavy timber.

He returned to the fastnesses of his den-land. He was no longer hungry in his soul. He had walked with a human, one that understood. To his purring a pleasant voice had responded. Never had the grandeur of the wilderness been more soothing, more splendid, as with his heart's longing appeased he cantered back to his den.

That night he called into the spaces of the hills, where his voice surged and echoed in tall timber, along the precipices of stone

and down the gulches and cañons. The shivering silences were the only reply to his wild cries. He did not feel rebuked by the quiet, for had he not walked with a human?

FELIS CONCOLOR basked the next evening in the setting sun. He had been at a high pitch of nervous expectancy, for those who approach men takes chances and carry their lives as offerings. As he was weary after eating much good veal or venison, so now he was surfeit with satisfaction of his lonesomeness by much friendly companionship.

He saw the white sun turn yellow and then orange; he saw the valley colored blue, with great, shapely, purple shadows; he saw the sky bright with many hues, while dust of air turned to color of gold and pearl. The sunlight gone and a chill breath from mountain-peaks coming down, he retreated into his cave, where he slept till the moon was shining and hunger bade him awaken, for it was time to hunt.

In two or three days he was lonesome again. He crossed the range, edged down into the junipers below the timber, and near the human runway he found that human again. She was not afraid this time. Instead she laughed when she saw him and called him "Kitty." He dropped to the ground, stretched his neck upon his forelegs and gazed at her.

She sat on a low boulder, looking at him. She told him things she had never told any one in her life before. She spoke in sibilant whispers, she sang in a low voice, and she made the most casual remarks.

When she walked along the mountain he walked with her, never very far from her, never within three steps of her. When she would have made bold to pat his head he drew away doubtfully, his ears lying back, and his purring was broken, even ceased. Then she must needs beg his pardon in a most caressing voice. Not for worlds would she abuse his confidence!

She told him that she was his friend. She explained how she was lonely on the ranch, that she detested Toyab Edem, favorite son of Grizzly Edem, because Toyab was a youth after Grizzly's own heart.

"I'm just sort of a distant relative!" she said. "And Toyab takes it for granted I—that I admire his shooting and slaying heartlessness. I don't— Oh, I hate him! But—but——"

Her voice trailed away in helpless resignation.

"All Toyab lives for is to be like old Grizzly," she went on. "He wants to be like his father. They laugh at me because I love the sunrise and the Leopard Ridge, which is spotted on its cream-colored clay with junipers. I love jackrabbits with their absurd legs and ears—but Toyab just loves to kill them. And I hate venison, because living deer are so beautiful! You understand, don't you, cougar?"

Felis Concolor blinked. Probably if he had understood he would most assuredly have grinned widely. As it was, he purred a bit louder to show his general appreciation. No guilt was in his conscience, despite the good feed he had had the previous evening when a yearling deer fell to his right paw's deadly crash.

Rose Stanley had found companionship and appreciation. The cougar was comforted in his own loneliness. Certainly there was mutual understanding between the human and the cougar who was moved to go walking with a human.

But Toyab Edem was coming down off the mountain range on horseback one day after sunset, feeling cheated because his hunting had been so steady that he had killed or driven away all the game within easy range of the ranch. As he left the thick timber and worked his way down through the junipers he discovered Rose on her way home. At the same time he saw in the sand wash of a dry run a track that brought him up short.

"Huh!" he exclaimed. "Cougar—an' fresh!"

In five minutes he read the trails. The huge cat had been following Rose Stanley. Toyab was slow of wit. He figured, as he would have said, right smart.

For a long time he had found that young woman a problem. She wouldn't accept his least clumsy attempts to be sociable; she wouldn't permit him to fetch and carry for her; in vain he had sought for some sure means of making her obligated to him. Now, he surmised, fortune had at last rewarded his patience and his terrific skill.

"I'll keep dead quiet," he told himself cunningly. "I ain't goin' to have no slip-up; I ain't no one to brag 'fore I've made good!"

Toyab slipped away an hour before false dawn on the following morning. None

knew that he was going, or whither he was going. He went up the mountains. He had his suspicions. His instinct helped; his knowledge, too, garnered at the expense of a thousand raids in that glorious land of beauty and hardship.

He found the forest silent, and to his liking. With what he knew he had much to work through. He followed the crest of the Greentimber Range; he found a track there, the pad of the cougar; he ransacked the gloom of the mountain-side; for once he saw deer that he did not slay, though he itched.

He worked his way on moccasins to the corner of the Wasting Hills. His dull, opaque, fishy eyes noted sign, traces and careless cougar footsteps. He found shed hair of the "varmint." He was amazed and delighted. Since when had any one found a cougar lair in this land? He read the tracks with greedy hope. Somewhere about was the scoundrel's den.

"Huh!" Toyab grinned. "Follerin' Rose Stanley, eh? Huh!"

Through his cold veins he felt warm the flood of his avarice for her with the certainty that now he'd show her how he'd been watching out, taking care of her. He held his 30-30 carbine gripped ready in his hands as with clandestine approach he made his way in and out among the massy broken rock and through the tall spruce stand.

He peered, glanced, looked and studied with thorough caution and unlimited patience. He saw jays, and froze till they had passed on without discovering him, for they are the tell-tales of the wilderness.

He saw mice, a marmot, a rabbit. Few things were missed by his searching look. He came to the edge of a landslide. Across the open he saw something. He grew rigid.

On the brink and edge of things, where a stony bench was at the mouth of a cavern in the side of the steep mountain, he saw a huge brute lying stretched at ease, licking one paw and basking in the sunshine, which was welcome there some nine thousand feet above the level of the sea.

"Huh!" breathed Toyab Edems. "Gormity, w'at a size! He c'uld kill a bull!"

The carbine came swiftly up, and in two seconds the tragedy was enacted. A long, slim projectile struck the back of the head of Felis Concolor in the broad, sleek space just behind the ears so that he did not know he was struck. His light went out—all that deep, beautiful valley, all the crystalline blue of the cloudless sky, the purple shadows and the brilliant sunshine itself.

"Hawh!" Toyab Edem chortled, twisting his lower jaw as he bounded down to his victim to kick and maul it in the exuberance of his noble deed.

He drew his dark-bladed, gleaming, edged knife, exclaiming:

"I bet, by gabby, 't Rose'll go plumb wild, seein's I vengified her fer bein' tracked aroun' by this ol' scoundrel painter! Hawh! I bet she will!"

He carried the great pelt proudly home, where he tossed it down at the feet of the girl who had from mere alarm grown to admire and understand that lonely big cat of the Greentimber Range who had walked with a human.

She looked at the tattered, loppy trophy, with its ghastly, blood-stained head. She gave a horrified glance at the unspeakable pride of Toyab Edem, and then she dropped on her knees by that pitiful remnant and burst into tears.

Toyab gaped in indignant amazement. Just at the moment of his great glory, when reward should have been his, the bestower laid the wreath of her tears on the grisly proof of his own prowess.

Old Grizzly gulped uneasily and with a shake of his head exclaimed—

"Women ain't what they used to be!"

MOHAMED ALI and the BASHA OF TANGIER

by George E. Holt

Author of "The See-Saw of Fate," "By the Grace of Allah," etc.

MOHAMED ALI lay in hiding in the house of one Mustapha, in Beni Toozin, not a dozen miles from Tangier, the basha of which was loudly proclaiming a price upon his head. Having been basha of that very Moroccan city where Sid Omar now sat, Mohamed Ali had been shorn of his power by the machinations of his enemies and the temporary withdrawal of the mantle of Allah's protection, and through force of necessity had become an outlaw.

Among the various events of a more or less exciting nature which had accomplished his downfall had been his attempted capture of a British subject, to be used as a medium of exchange. Wherefore the British Minister, Sir Mortimer Jones, had naturally demanded of the sultan the punishment of Mohamed Ali in order to discourage the use of sacred Englishmen in the political affairs of Morocco.

The only thing which prevented the sultan from obliging Sir Mortimer was his inability to catch Mohamed Ali. As a consequence of his impotence—or perhaps because of a certain native humor—he had passed the job on to the Basha of Tangier, ordering him with sultanic brevity to capture Mohamed Ali expeditiously.

"Mohamed Ali and the Basha of Tangier," copyright, 1923, by George E. Holt.

Now the basha did not need these orders from his royal master; for, having usurped the bashaship of Tangier from Mohamed Ali, it behooved him to have the head of his predecessor hung up over the city gate at Fez as quickly as possible, lest Mohamed Ali, who had many faithful followers, should again do as he had done in the past, and turn the tables upon his enemies. In which case Sid Omar ibn Malek knew quite well that it would be his own head which would serve to entertain passers through the Fez gate. And Sid Omar valued his head greatly. As the reward he offered was really for the privilege of retaining that portion of his anatomy, he was liberal.

Mohamed Ali, lying in the little stone-walled, thatch-roofed house of Mustapha, and clad in dirty brown garments which would have nauseated him under other conditions, was beginning to fret against the enforced inactivity. He was getting bored. Even contemplation of a sultan and a basha, with their cohorts, seeking him where he was not, had been losing its humor.

True, there had been one break in the monotonous week—when by night he had carried the girl-child of Mustapha and his wife to the British medical missionaries in Tangier to be treated for pneumonia, and there had run straight into his Excellency

Sir Mortimer Jones. But Sir Mortimer had shown himself a better man than official and apparently had not even informed the native authorities that obviously Mohamed Ali must be not far from Tangier if he brought sick native children to the city for treatment. His Excellency, thought Mohamed Ali, was a good sportsman.

But the illness of Habiba, the tiny daughter of the house, had taken her from him. The days were short for the big, black-bearded man when she played with him and made love to him in ways which he completely understood, and replied to in kind.

Mohamed Ali had children of his own safely hidden from his enemies in a house among the inaccessible Riffian hills. Wherefore Habiba pulled with impunity the whiskers of the terrible bandit and rubbed the shiny hilt of the curved silver-sheathed *kumiah* which hung beneath his left armpit and hid his slippers and laughed gleefully while he searched fruitlessly and then accused her with scowling forehead but smiling brown eyes.

Habiba lay convalescing—thrice blessed be the holy name of Allah!—in Tangier; the British Minister had kept silent; the sultan sought him around Fez, two hundred miles away, and the basha's men cluttered all over the *Fahs* asking silly questions. There was nothing left to do but count the pears on the hedge of cactus which enclosed the homestead of Mustapha. But this had grown monotonous, even after he had found that there were ninety and nine of them, precisely the number of the virtuous attributes of Allah, which he repeated thereupon as he recounted the fruit. Yes, Mohamed Ali was bored.

Now when a man like Mohamed Ali becomes restless it is much the same as when a volcano begins to fret against its restrictions. Mohamed Ali craved action. And Allah smiled upon him and sent him Opportunity.

Mustapha, his host, came to say that he had heard that one Achmed el-Ashery of a neighboring village had come to suspect the presence of Mohamed Ali and that he had thereupon consulted with Omar ibn Malek, the Basha of Tangier, concerning the matter. He—Achmed el-Ashery—was now back in the village. Mustapha, of course, could not guess what steps he or the basha were about to take.

"Moreover, concluded Mustapha, "the basha has caused it to be made public that he has increased the reward for your head, O Sidi, and that he will now pay two thousand Spanish dollars."

"I have heard," answered Mohamed Ali, "of a Christian law called supply and demand, which is supposed to regulate prices," and fell to thinking. Then, "The basha's young son still rides each evening across the plain of Boubana to the shrine of his uncle, Mulai M'hamed?" he asked.

Mustapha answered that the boy did so and was about to go, but Mohamed Ali drew him to a seat beside him, and spoke somewhat at length to him.

Now shortly thereafter, while Mohamed Ali was snoring gently, Mustapha sought out Achmed el-Ashery in the neighboring village, concerning a cow which he had for sale. Achmed talked cow with him for an hour, and then left the way open for what might be Mustapha's real business.

Within sixty seconds thereafter he had promised to divide the two thousand Spanish dollars with Mustapha if the latter would deliver Mohamed Ali into his hands. Mustapha vehemently agreed to do this very thing on the following day.

He made but one condition, which was that Achmed al-Ashery should arrange with the basha for the delivery of Mohamed Ali to him in person, in his office, when they should bring him there. No, he needed no help in the matter; Mohamed Ali's tea could easily be drugged with *opia*.

At sunset then, the following evening, Mustapha would meet Achmed, bringing with him, most securely bound, the person of Mohamed Ali. It would be dark by the time they reached Tangier, Mustapha pointed out, and thus the eyes of the curious would be blind.

So Achmed el-Ashery hastened off to acquaint the basha with the arrangement and to experience some difficulty in preventing him from unduly precipitate action, while Mustapha hurried back home. And the following day came.

IN MID-AFTERNOON Mohamed Ali, with one eye and most of his face covered by a filthy bandage, and looking therefore not at all like Mohamed Ali, rode a sorry nag slowly across the field of Boubana toward the shrine of Mulai M'hamed. There he fell into

converse with a youth who told him that he was the son of Omar ibn Malek, Basha of Tangier.

At sunset, Mustapha, accompanied by another mounted figure, whose face was covered almost completely by the hood of his *djellab* met Achmed el-Ashery as had been arranged. Achmed raised the hood—and recoiled from the face of Mohamed Ali. Then he saw that the hands, beneath the folds of the big sleeves, were tied tightly. Thereupon the three of them rode through the deepening purple shadows into Tangier and toward the presence of Sid Omar ibn Malek, the basha.

Matters occurred swiftly then. The basha looked at the tied wrists and familiar face of Mohamed Ali and bubbled with relief. His head felt remarkably permanent. He even chuckled and jested as he handed over to Achmed el-Ashery the two thousand Spanish dollars, or rather their equivalent in bank-notes. Mustapha stood very near Achmed el-Ashery during this time, and quickly took his own share. The money he stowed away in his *shakarah*, thanked the basha, took Achmed by the arm and led him out.

"We will go back to my village," said Mustapha, "and make merry over this matter."

Mohamed Ali was left alone with the basha. He knew that in the anteroom were a score of soldiers, and that the basha's heart would be gladdened if he could find excuse to call them to dispose of his prisoner.

Yet Mohamed Ali began to laugh. He was a big man, and his laugh was like him. The room vibrated with it—and the basha grew pink with anger and puzzlement. But, "Laugh," he said, "while you have a head to laugh with."

And replied Mohamed Ali between roars—

"Two thousand Spanish dollars that I laugh when your head is in pickle of the Fez Jews."

This was no laughing matter to the basha. He stepped toward the door to order his soldiers to take Mohamed Ali to the *casbah* and to dispatch a swift runner to Fez with news for his Shareefian Majesty that the lion had been snared. But, "A moment, your Excellency," said Mohamed Ali. "You have a son, if I am not mistaken."

"Yes. A fine— But what is that to you, scoundrel?"

Yet the basha's eyes lighted, for the boy was the pride of his heart.

"He rode this afternoon as usual to the shrine of his uncle, Mulai M'hamed, did he not?"

"He did."

The basha's eyes grew troubled.

"Then he told me the truth," said Mohamed Ali, nodding his head.

"He—he told *you* the truth!"

Terror was in the basha's eyes now.

"Oh, yes. He *said* he was your son. I perhaps doubted it."

"And—and— Oh, Allah—" cried the basha, and looked Mohamed Ali full in the eyes.

Mohamed Ali returned the look and added to it.

"I shall set him at liberty, to return to you, as soon as I am able to do so."

He looked at the bonds upon his wrists.

"But first make sure that he has not returned."

"The basha made one step toward the door. Then he stopped.

"By Allah! I am sure already. I am no fool."

"Of that I am not so certain," quietly observed Mohamed Ali, and laughed again. "Come now, and with that *kumiah* which hangs in your belt, cut these ropes. Be careful, lest the knife slip—and kill your son. I am hungry and would be gone. And no doubt the lad is hungry too."

Omar ibn Malek, the basha, drew his keen blade and cut the bonds of Mohamed Ali—carefully.

"Yes," he said, as Mohamed rubbed his wrists, "you are right, and I am a fool. Thrice a fool. Once for having thought Mohamed Ali the same. Once for loving my son better than life itself. And once because, when I set you free, his Majesty will assuredly place my head on the very gate where *you* put it in your jest. *Ail Ail*

"But there is no might save the might of Allah, and what He wills must be. And I *do* love the boy!"

"He shall come to you unharmed, and only a little frightened," said Mohamed Ali. "And your head shall be safe so long as your mouth keeps closed. This matter shall be between ourselves—if you pardon Mustapha his share in the trick."

"He is pardoned," interjected the basha.

"No harm shall come to him. But there is Achmed el-Ashery—on whom be ten thousand curses! I forgot! He has the money!"

"No, your Excellency," made answer Mohamed Ali. "He *had* the money. I think—I *think* mind you—that tomorrow some one will find Achmed by the side of the Fèz road, and that he will be very dead. My friend, Mustapha, did not like him. He desired riches too greatly."

"Besides which," added the basha, "he had a thousand dollars in his *shakarah*."

"Yes," agreed Mohamed Ali. "Or did have."

"What is ordained by Allah must be," observed the basha. "And I shall not be deeply grieved—except as to the money."

Mohamed Ali again laughed long and loud.

"That, O Excellency, is a little thing to pay for such a lesson. And for thy son."

"Aye—yes—my son! Go now, and send him to me—and all warfare between us shall be over."

"That, I think, is true," said Mohamed Ali, still laughing. "Unless your head craves a place on the city wall."

"Allah forbid! Peace between us. Allah go with thee. *Selaama*."

Thus it came about that Mohamed Ali returned to the house of Mustapha, where he released and sent home one Abd-el-Khader ibn Hadj Omar ibn Malek, son of the Basha of Tangier. There he learned from Mustapha, who was engaged in cleaning his *kumiah* that even as he thought, Achmed el-Ashery, on the way home with Mustapha, had met with misfortune. His horse, it seemed, had stumbled and fallen — most remarkably! — and Achmed's own *kumiah* falling from a loose sheath, had entered his body, causing him to die with great suddenness.

"Allah," observed Mohamed Ali, "governs all things. And Achmed would have delivered me to mine enemies. Blessed be the name of Allah."

"Blessed be His name," agreed Mustapha, and fell to counting two thousand dollars.

REQUIEM

By Charles King Van Riper

CAPTAIN BLENKIRON, at the rail of the *Centurion*, glanced up at Kendrick as the wireless operator came aboard. Their eyes met for a moment, then Blenkiron nodded slightly in answer to an unspoken question.

"We're going out!" echoed Kendrick. The words were addressed less to Blenkiron than to the whining storm and the old *Centurion* herself, creaking at the cables that held her to her pier.

"Neither the *Sunset State* nor the *Thames* is sailing," he informed the back of Blenkiron's broad shoulders. Kendrick was still too young to conceal completely his excitement at the prospect of putting to sea in a storm like this. It showed in his voice, in the expression of his alert, boyish face.

On his way back to the boat through the storm-swept city, Kendrick had concluded that the *Centurion* would lay up for at least another tide. But she was going out after all! While the two crack liners stayed at their docks!

Kendrick glanced along the *Centurion's* scarred deck to her black, blunt bow. She was an old-timer and a cranky baggage at best. But she was Kendrick's first berth—and Kendrick, it may as well be admitted, was incurably romantic.

The register was brutally frank about the old cargo boat. She was notable neither for tonnage nor speed, even when she was built, and that was twenty-five years before. But romance whispered to Kendrick that she was of the sea and that all the sea's traditions were her heritage. Accordingly, Kendrick disregarded her registry.

Even to himself he never definitely identified a single distinction of the *Centurion*, but neither did he relinquish the secret confidence that in an emergency, a case of downright necessity, she would go out and do more than better ships would dare.

Kendrick's ready discounting of the sorry facts of horse-power, design and burden are understandable. He had been brought up on the Tortoise and the Hare, David and Goliath, the diamond in the rough. All he'd done was to make the *Centurion* a seagoing *Cinderella* that would some day find the slipper of opportunity—for which good opinion he was repaid by being almost suffocated in a hot smother of acrid smoke that swirled down on the deck.

Captain Blenkiron turned half-way around and glared balefully at the smudge that rolled from the *Centurion's* lone funnel. His lowered glance fell on Kendrick and the bundle under the operator's arm.

"More wireless gear?" he asked, and added. "You'll be broke if you keep on buying that stuff."

"You're wrong," laughed Kendrick pleasantly. "I *am* broke. But wait till I hook this up!"

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He settled the package more securely under his arm.

"Extra head-receiver set?" suggested the master of the *Centurion*.

"Better than that! Wait!" promised Kendrick.

And he pushed through the deck-house door and was gone.

Blenkiron turned back to the bay. The wind was driving the water in low, racing white-caps that came out of the blur of the storm and were lost where it closed in again a scant two hundred yards away. Close at hand there was the shrill whistle of a ferry-boat but the craft itself was only a misty shape that glided past the *Centurion's* stern. Blenkiron squared his shoulders, straightened up abruptly and turned from the rail.

In the two hours that preceded the *Centurion's* sailing, Kendrick was the busiest man aboard. The Norwegian bosun almost collapsed when he saw the operator come crawling out of the starboard ventilator, an apparition more mystifying and startling because he had not seen Kendrick contrive to cram himself into it some twenty minutes before. It looked as if the young man had taken a short-cut from below-decks.

By the time the *Centurion* was warped out of her dock, Kendrick had finished the outside work and there remained only a rearrangement of the apparatus in the wireless room to complete the installation he was making.

It was slow work, beating down the bay, and a thunderingly rough passage through the Gate. But Kendrick, absorbed in what he was doing, gave it no thought although he was annoyed that he was not able to work with the utmost rapidity and accuracy because of the unsteady behavior of the ship.

THEY were at sea when a sound at the door made Kendrick glance over his shoulder. Blenkiron swung it open and entered. He threw off his streaming oil-skins, sat down, and fired up his pipe before he spoke.

"By the beard of Moses I hope I won't have to do that again!" he sighed, breathing out a cloud of smoke.

"Was kind of bad," agreed Kendrick and kept scraping at some insulation for a splice.

"Kind of bad!" echoed the captain, and added: "But I don't suppose you could be expected to notice it! I've never seen the beat of you radio bugs when you get to puttering."

"I've always wanted to be at sea in a storm——"

"You're going to get your wish," the captain assured him. "With the old ballyhoo in ballast and a blow like this! A man could navigate better with a diver's helmet and a pair of cork legs."

"I didn't think we'd sail," said Kendrick. "Not when we aren't going anywhere but to be overhauled and refitted. It's hard to imagine the owners being so anxious to spend money. Now if this was a regular run——"

Blenkiron with a quick glance checked Kendrick.

"I didn't tell you," he explained, "the *Gladiator* put back to Seattle last night. Crippled engines. We're going to load her cargo and make the run."

The work of scraping the wire stopped abruptly. Kendrick was thoughtful.

"But the *Centurion?* Can we do it?" he faltered.

"You mean, can we make Seattle!" was Blenkiron's grim amendment.

There was silence—a long silence as the *Centurion* swam on a mountainous tide. She was straining with the laboring of her engine and shaken by torrents of wind that rushed over her. Around the wireless room was a row of dull mirrors where the water flowed in sheets across the ports.

The men looked at each other steadily, then Blenkiron flattened his big hands heavily on his knees and stood up. He slanted an eye at Kendrick's table.

"What was all that junk I saw you smuggling aboard?"

"Something new," said Kendrick.

"New?" The captain professed a decided skepticism. "I thought you had everything there was to get." He stood looking down at an array of apparatus that might have led even a technical man into the same mistake.

"Wonderful what it'll do though!" he admitted, and, after another appraisal, asked. "Have they been having that concert business tonight?"

"Every night," replied Kendrick as he took up his splicing again, "but the first one's over and they don't broadcast again until nine forty-five. Wait till I get my magnavox hooked up and we'll have a *real* concert."

"Magna—?" asked Blenkiron, puzzled, picking up the handiest bit of apparatus.

"That's not it—" Kendrick hastily repossessed himself of one of his precious lamps. "I've rigged it up in the starboard ventilator. It's an amplifier that makes those songs and orchestra numbers you've listened to in the head-receiver sound as loud as if you were sitting in the theater."

The captain smiled indulgently at the enthusiast's overstatement.

"It's a fact," declared the unquenched Kendrick. "They use them for announcing at football games and things like that, where there's a big crowd. That ventilator will act like a megaphone. You'll hear it all over the ship."

The captain shook his head hopelessly.

"You wireless birds get the rating," he grunted. "Able-bodied nuts! How much has all this stuff cost you?"

"Between six hundred and six fifty," Kendrick admitted. "All I've saved."

The captain attempted a scowling comprehension of how it was possible. All he could see was a hopeless tangle of wires, and boxes, and cylinders. He gave it up. Kendrick continued looking at the set that he had hooked up and adjusted with such infinite care and patience—ready to respond at the turn of a switch by bringing the voices of the world to this little room.

Blenkiron was studying his boyish companion.

"Means a lot to you, eh!" he said kindly, picking up his oilskins.

Kendrick nodded without looking up.

As the captain swung into his coat, Kendrick asked—

"Coming in for the concert?"

"Not tonight," Blenkiron answered in a voice muffled by his collar as he set himself for the plunge into the storm. "Guess I'll have to use my personal influence to keep this crazy old kettle down to business."

He drew back the door and lurched out into the rain-lashed night.

Kendrick listened-in on the concert. On the night before he had crossed the wide stream of Market Street to where the frescoed façade of the Alhambra Theater, washed with white light, stood out like a luminous Gibraltar. In the luxury of soft cushions and the security of steel and stone and solid earth he had seen and heard the show. For the musical number there was a violinist who with the vibrations of four slender strings filled the vast auditorium—That was one world!

To-night Kendrick was on a black dot that swam imperceptibly out into the Pacific. This was a dingy world that was run by a creaky engine and heaved and groaned and fought for survival against wind and rolling walls of water. Its limits lay just beyond the dull gleam of the rain-bleared glass in the ports. But with the pressure of his finger, Kendrick brought back that other world, the world of lights and people into which he had come and moved and departed all unnoticed. And as he slipped the head-receiver on there was again the lifted ecstasy of the violin—a thread of silver sound in the rushing tempest.

Kendrick listened to the end, the announcement by the manager of the theater's wireless concerts. On the next night, he said, the Alhambra Jazz Hounds would give a program of their most popular selections "at seven forty-five and again at nine forty-five. Thank you, and to all, good night."

With the receivers removed from his ears, the roaring fury of the storm rushed in on Kendrick. One moment the *Centurion* would heel over under an avalanche of wind. Then next she would smash head-on into a tide of water, all but buckling with the shock before she buried her ugly old bow and plowed through. Wave after wave boarded her, but she would shoulder her way up again, shake them off, and stumble on.

Kendrick slept little that night.

Dawn came with the gray gloom of doomsday. Fog as thick as gristle, rain-fog, shut down around the half-acre of seething water where the *Centurion* wallowed. Waves swept up out of the unknown to slither along her sides or topple in thundering tons upon her decks. And as she came reeling up out of the flood the black smoke sucked down and trailed over the hissing sea.

There were instants when the ship clung to a perilous footing, with up-flung stern and racing propeller, shaking in every plate and rivet as the great drive-shaft thrashed blindly in its well. Then with a convulsive shudder she would settle back into the sea.

The day wore on. Along late in the afternoon it seemed to Kendrick that the gale was slackening—or maybe it was just a lull. He was playing idly with the set, tuning to varied wave lengths.

Suddenly the receiver crackled with a fragment of the code.

'—derelict."

Kendrick, brought bolt upright, read the signature: a coast guard service call. He found it listed for the cutter *Cougar*.

The operator waited impatiently for the message to be repeated, but the receiver was silent. His hand hovered over the key. In a moment he was sending the call.

The receiver sounded almost instantly with the *Cougar's* acknowledgment.

"Repeat warning," coded Kendrick.

"Ships on course—" Kendrick made a penciled note of the figures as the message coming over the stormy miles of dark water ended with: "Caution. Derelict!"

'Wind's dropping," added the coast guard man, "worst is over. Good luck."

Kendrick picked up the paper on which he had made the memorandum, hauled on his coat, and carried the message to Blenkiron.

"We'll be careful," promised the captain.

"Here's her position," Kendrick explained, handing Blenkiron the notation of figures that he had already given orally.

"H'm!" mused the captain, glancing at the bit of paper then scowling out into the gathering darkness. He turned away with a preoccupied tweak at his ear.

Back in the wireless room, Kendrick, lighting his lamp, reflected that if this was the end of the blow, the old *Centurion* hadn't given a half-bad account of herself. The *Sunset State* and the *Thames* hadn't sailed. Yes, the *Centurion* had done pretty well! Kendrick guessed she could turn up her nose now at the proud sisters who stayed home.

The unemotional *Centurion* kept lumbering along. *She* hadn't any imagination. But she didn't need it. Kendrick had enough for both—enough to give a glow of heroism to what was only part of an old cargo-boat's drudgery, enough——

The ship veered suddenly in one of those coasting descents.

Kendrick, half-way out of his chair, was thrown to his knees as she came into violent collision, bow-on.

WHEN he reached the door he could see a lantern bobbing in the blackness as some one ran forward along the deck. The next instant there was the ghastly dawn of a lighted flare. Two men passed him: Blenkiron and Beckwith, the first officer.

The deck was in plain view now in the unearthly light of the Coston cartridge. A man was holding it out over the bow. Two of the crew had come to the door of the forecastle. Blenkiron and Beckwith were running forward. Kendrick started after them.

When he came up there were five men at the lee rail. Beckwith had just touched off a second flare. Looking down, Kendrick could make out a mass of wreckage around the *Centurion's* bow.

"—a derelict." Beckwith was saying shakily.

"Take charge on deck, Mr. Beckwith," ordered Blenkiron. "I'm going below——"

But there was no need of it. The chief came swarming up the ladder over the forward break. Beyond him Kendrick could see the stokers gathered in the waist.

"How is it, Mr. Wilson?"

"Bad, sir!" answered the engineer. "Big hole in her bow, and twisted her until there's no closing the for'rd bulk-head. There's water——"

Blenkiron turned and ordered the boats. He knew Wilson too well to waste time by going below himself, except as a formality. That could wait—now—he saw Kendrick.

"Get help, Mr. Kendrick!"

Kendrick ran aft and climbed to the wireless room. He stumbled breathlessly across the threshold and flung himself on the key.

Once—twice—a third time he sent the signal.

There was no answer, and below decks was a sound like the hiss of a great serpent as the sea-water slopped against hot metal.

Kendrick sent desperately. He tried the *Cougar's* call. They were there! Why didn't they answer? After the click of the key was silence—a lengthening, nerve-tearing silence— What if they didn't hear—couldn't hear? There were dead, soundless pockets in the air——

KENDRICK kept sending, his glance nervously checking up the set for a possible "short." There wasn't any—he knew there wasn't! But they didn't answer! His beloved bits of apparatus blurred before Kendrick's eyes—what if it should fail him after——

The receiver was rattling with his answer! When Kendrick ran out on deck again,

the men were gathered about the starboard life-boat. They were a silent company, stowing hastily tied-up bundles under the thwarts. Beckwith, directing the men in swinging the boat over the side, told Kendrick that Blenkiron had gone below with Wilson.

Kendrick met them at the head of the engine-room ladder.

"The *Cougar's* coming, sir," he reported. "They'll stand by and pick up our boat."

When Kendrick got back to the rail, the crew were in the boat, men at the falls. He turned for a last look at the *Centurion*, her age and ugliness accentuated by the light of the flares.

She had made her fight and won. The treacherous thrust of that dead thing in the sea had finished her but could not take away her victory. That had come first.

"Abandoned ship at 7:40 P.M.," Blenkiron was repeating formally. "Will you verify the time, Mr. Kendrick."

As Kendrick consulted his watch, the *Centurion's* bow sagged suddenly.

"Just seven forty," he said.

"Very good!"

The captain made a gesture toward the boat, watching Wilson as the engineer, with a shrug of his shoulders, turned and swung over the rail. When Blenkiron glanced back to where Kendrick had been standing beside him the operator had vanished.

"Gone back to the wireless room," shouted some one from the boat.

Blenkiron caught a glimpse of him turning in at the door.

"Mr. Kendrick!" he roared and took a step as if he intended to follow. The *Centurion* was settling fast. There was the perilous launching of the life-boat to be made, and after that the pull for safety from the suck of the ship as she plunged. Blenkiron stopped at a single stride.

"The young fool!" he muttered. "None of the —— instruments is worth the chance." Raising his voice he thundered, "Kendrick, come on!" There was neither answering sound nor sign of him.

It was Kendrick's life or the lives of the rest of them. The captain kept his eyes for an instant on the door of the wireless room, then turned savagely on his heel. He dropped into the boat as it swung inward with the sluggish roll of the foundering ship.

"Let go!" he said.

The boat struck with a slap, the holds were cleared, and the oars ran out.

"There he is!" yelled Beckwith over the confusion, but Blenkiron, whose eyes had never left that opened door, had seen Kendrick come running out.

"Lay to!" he roared at the boat crew and stood up to make the man on deck hear.

Kendrick was at the rail—standing on it—swinging out hand over hand on the forward davit. He had the rope—was sliding. The backwash had swept the boat away from where the operator dangled over the dark water.

Blenkiron roared an order, and the men, working like demons, brought the boat around.

"Run under that rope," Blenkiron shouted. "*Now!*"

As the wave welled up, the oars caught the crest and sent the boat spurting ahead. Kendrick let go.

Blenkiron's big arms went out to break the fall—but missed. Kendrick sprawled in the bottom of the boat as it veered off and pulled away from the doomed *Centurion*.

There was blood on the operator's face where he had struck the gunwale, and the breath had been knocked out of him. But Blenkiron, bending over Kendrick, made sure that he was not badly hurt.

"You're a fool for luck," muttered the captain, propping him up with rough gentleness. "None of that junk is worth the risk you took to salvage it."

Kendrick opened his eyes and looked up at Blenkiron with a dazed, foolish smile. He guessed the captain didn't understand——

"You're in the boat, boy," began Blenkiron, and suddenly the hands that held Kendrick tightened in a tremendous grip.

Around Kendrick in the boat was a babel of hoarse, half-stifled oaths, a sob, and then the awed hush that holds men face to face with another world. Blenkiron's fingers fell away, and Kendrick, freed, raised himself on his elbow.

Beyond a black interval the bulk of the *Centurion* loomed in the ghostly twilight of the last, almost spent flare. Her stern was high out of water and the seas washing over her forward. The decks, dripping as she rose, were empty desolation—but from aboard her came music, the rushing, hysterical rythmns of jazz.

"It's the seven forty-five concert at the

Alhambra," whispered Kendrick. "Remember me telling you I hooked the radio up to the ventilator——?"

Blenkiron swore under his breath.

Out in this wilderness of sea there was a weird, savage solemnity in the music.

Some one in the boat touched off a floating flare to guide the *Cougar* when she came. Kendrick glanced around at the strained, white faces of the men in the boat.

"Anyhow the old ballyhooo is going down with the band playing," said Blenkiron huskily.

Kendrick nodded. He couldn't trust himself to speak. And anyway he thought the captain understood.

THE KING'S CHOICE

A Complete Novelette

by **Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur**

Author of "For the Crown," "With Song and Sword," etc.

"THEY follow!"

Cercamon reined in on the crest of a low hill and gazed back over the road that paralleled the blue Loire across the plain, like a white stripe and a blue one across a richly broidered garment.

"All the way from the town have they followed me!" he muttered. "But the hunter that shows himself to his quarry has little chance of a kill."

And he waved a scornful hand at the distant figures in gleaming mail, who had kept ever at his heels since dawn, without once gaining on him, without once losing sight of him.

Till now he had not been sure it was he they sought. It was no rare thing for armed men to take the high road from Tours to Paris. The riders of Anjou, who held Touraine for Duke Geoffrey le Bel, patroled it ceaselessly; merchants or pilgrims with their escorts, or men-at-arms seeking service, traveled that road often.

But Cercamon had reason to be wary of mailed men; and after leaving the Loire and the distant spires of Tours behind him he had become troubled. He had first caught sight of those riders at sunrise, half an hour after he had ridden out from the gate of the city. Their constant trailing at his heels fretted him more and more, till he resolved to test their purpose. Therefore, an hour ago, he had turned aside from the highway, down a little-used road lined with trees, where armed men could have no honest business.

If they kept to the main road, well and good; but if they turned off after him, he would know they sought but a favorable

chance to overtake and assail him. And so, when he trotted out of the byway on to the high road again, having seen the shimmer of their mail thrice behind him, he was sure. And now he could glimpse the sunlight flashing full and bright on their harness as they rode out of the byway on his trail.

The certainty that he was pursued did not astonish him. Cercamon rode on a weighty errand, one fraught with vast significance for all of France. On his success hung the issues of peace or war between great princes, the fortunes of rival houses, perhaps the fate of two kingdoms.

It was early April of 1137, that year so fateful for the young realm of France. The Abbot Suger, ruling in the name of the boy King Louis VII, was soon to hand over his authority to his royal ward. It was a dangerous burden for so fiery and untrained a lad, for the kingdom of France was but a little triangle with Paris, Sens, and Orléans for its corners, claiming a shadowy and perilous sovereignty over the mighty principalities that surrounded it on all sides.

Of all those principalities the mightiest was Aquitaine, its vast area rolling from Loire to Pyrenees, from the Gascon Gulf to the borders of Toulouse. Hated by his neighbors, feared by the Regent Suger, Duke Guilhem X of Aquitaine had just gone to an unmourned grave. Only the iron hand of his great seneschal, Bertrand d'Armagnac, warded the rich lands and the beautiful young daughter Guilhem had left from the greedy hands of rival barons.

"These letters to the Abbot Suger!" Armagnac had commanded. "Let them not go from your hands till they pass into his in Paris. And ride warily, Cercamon; keep your eyes open and your hand on your sword, for I fear your errand is known to our enemies. My late lord the duke was not discreet in this matter, and his court has swarmed with the spies of Champagne."

"Why send me, my lord?" Cercamon had asked his master. "I am both too humble a man and too weak for such an errand."

"Any messenger will be exposed to attack as soon as he leaves Poitou and our garrisons behind him," Armagnac had answered. "If we send a strong force, it will be ambushed by a stronger. Touraine belongs to Anjou; and Anjou loves us little. The road lies too near the borders of Blois to be safe, even for a small army; for Thibault of Champagne has a strong garrison in Blois. A single man has more chance of slipping through than a troop; and of all men you are our best hope. You are brave, cunning, resourceful; you are a troubadour, and even the most lawless man in France scarce dares lay a hand on the sacred person of a troubadour. Castel-Roussillon's fate is fresh in men's memories; even kings fear to commit his crime, lest they perish as he perished."

So Cercamon rode northeast, leaving Poitiers in the dead of night and bearing to the mighty Abbot Suger a proposal, signed by Aliénor, Duchess of Aquitaine, for a royal marriage between herself and the young King Louis. Even as the troubadour left the dark walls behind him, two scarce dead figures dangled from the walls of Poitiers' northern tower—Champenois merchants, who had been caught that afternoon in unlawful conversation with the guard at the North Gate. In their lodgings had been found parchments which—skilfully decoded by the duchess' secretary—had been discovered to contain a full report of the task entrusted to Cercamon.

The young troubadour—a Gascon, of low birth and rare genius—had been in Armagnac's service barely a year. In Poitiers he had first sung before a courtly audience, and now his name was known over all France for the sweetness of his song and the rich perfection of his verses. In Aquitaine he had equal repute as a swordsman, and Bertrand d'Armagnac, whom he served with deep devotion, knew him for as shrewd and cool a head as any in the south. He was well equipped even for so great a task as that which now rested on his broad shoulders.

He rode now, as always, in the rich garments of his calling; for if the sacredness of that vocation were to save him from attack, he must appear at first glance for what he was. But he wore his long, double-edged sword, and under his scarlet tunic he bore a shirt of fine-meshed, impenetrable Moorish mail. His long, black hair floated unbound beneath a flat cap of blue velvet, and his green-hosed legs clasped the sides of the swiftest horse in the stables of Poitiers.

He felt assured that Count Thibault of Champagne would seek to stop him, regardless of the inviolability which surrounded one of his calling. Thibault was a hard-handed, hard-headed tyrant, who feared not men's judgments. And Thibault was most ambitious of all the French barons; he hated

Aquitaine and—he had a daughter of marriageable age. The dead Duke Guilhem was not the only feudal prince in the realm who stood to profit from a marriage between his daughter and the young king. The troubadour was not yet so highly honored in the north as in the south, and if men of birth feared to assail him there were rough-handed spearmen who would undertake the task for protection and a price.

As he rode down the hill from which he had spied back upon his pursuers, Cercamon felt small fear of them. So far they had been well able to keep him in sight, for he had carefully spared his horse's strength. Whenever he chose he could leave them far behind. But he did fear lest other enemies might lurk in ambush ahead of him, for he knew Count Thibault's repute for remorseless determination and was certain that the Champenois would not pin his sole hope of heading off the Aquitanian messenger to the questionable chance of overtaking a well-mounted man from behind.

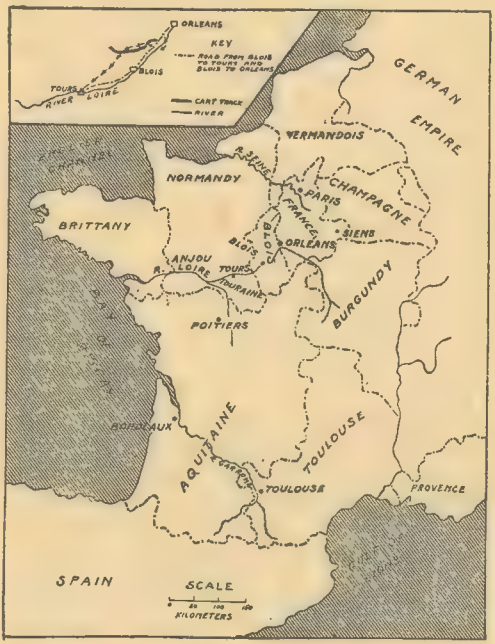
Moreover, cunning had shown itself in the first moment of the pursuit. Cercamon had not been followed until he had left Poitou; his followers had first shown themselves after he had ridden out from Tours. He had had no chance but to pass through Tours, above which there were no fords across the Loire till one came to Blois. And Blois, Thibault's strongest fortalice, lay but a day's ride from Tours.

Cercamon had planned to ride north in a wide circuit around Blois, lest he be seen from its walls. But the very fact that pursuit started from Tours proved that his enemies understood his intentions. It also proved that some of Thibault's spies had left Poitiers and arrived in Tours before him and watched for the precise moment of his setting forth along the river road. And in that case it was probable that the spies had ridden on ahead of him, to warn Thibault of his coming.

There would be ambush ahead as well as pursuers behind. And that ambush would doubtless be laid, not on the highroad near Blois, but on the northerly roads by which he planned to make his circuit.

THE afternoon was half-gone when Cercamon heard a swiftly rising drum of hoofs behind him. The pursuit was drawing suddenly closer; plainly they were ready to close in and settle the matter. Smiling, he reined in and counted them. Twelve men, mailed from top to toe, on good horses. He pricked his beast with the spur, and the splendid animal shot forward like an arrow.

The pursuit was sharp for a while; but at last he drew so far ahead of them that they seemed to realize the hopelessness of



riding him down, and checked their pace. Cercamon followed their example. Two or three times this was repeated, at intervals. Then Cercamon began to understand.

That handful of men-at-arms that tagged his heels had no expectation of catching him, with his swifter horse and lighter weight, for he was almost unencumbered by armor. Their task was to make him uneasy, to keep him in sight, keep him galloping. So long as their eyes could follow him, he dared not stop for food or sleep; and their sporadic spurts compelled him to wear down his mount with bursts of speed.

When his fleet roan was weary, and he himself grown desperate and careless with hunger and fatigue, they would have done their work. Somewhere ahead lay other riders, possibly hidden, who would either cut him off or take up the chase with fresh horses, when his own was no longer capable of its glorious swiftness.

There was only one way to defeat this

stratagem, and Cercamon resolved to take it. On the chance that the road ahead concealed an ambush, he must leave that road—before it grew dark. If he would escape the pursuit behind, he must outdistance them now, must leave them so far behind that they could not gain sight or trace of him again. Once out of touch with him, they could not signal their relays to take up the pursuit; and he rejoiced that he had spared his horse's strength. He thrust home the spurs, and felt the long-limbed roan burst into beautiful speed beneath him.

The sun was sinking now and dusk filtering into the cool air. Cercamon knew the country well; the river lay still to the right, but to the left there was a network of roads leading off into the rich plain. At one of these—but not the first—he would turn off; and he would not return to the highway till he was well past Blois. Out of sight behind him, the hunters would not know which way he had taken.

It was at the third road he turned, to the north; and by that time the highway lay empty for so far behind him as he could see or hear. Slackening his pace, he let the horse idle for a few moments and shifted about on the saddle to ease his limbs. He was well-concealed from the main road by clumps of willow, behind which a little stream sang in the gathering darkness. He smiled at the thought that he had confounded his enemies. That his journey was still beset with peril he did not doubt; but he would find an escape from each difficulty as he met it.

The roan nickered at the smell of water, and he let it drink from the brook. The night drew in soft and dark about him. In the shelter of the trees that grew ever thicker on both sides the road was black as a tomb. He was now riding through a wood; the air was damp, and the earth so soft under his horse's hoofs that they made no sound. For perhaps an hour he rode on, till he came to a bridle-path and paused to think.

That path led to a monastery of Cistercians, La Ferté-en-Bois, which lay on the edge of the forest, with its own fat fields spreading north and west of low, wide stone buildings. There he could find food, a refuge from his pursuers and rest—of all of which he stood in dire need. Most of all his horse needed rest. The monks would give him sanctuary, and none would dare assail him within their walls.

But—if his foes should learn that he was there, they would camp before it till he was forced to surrender. And to spend the night there would give them time to quarter the country for him or to cut him off from every road leading toward Paris. With a pang of regret he resolved to ride on all night, and in a little while he trotted past the few faint lights of the cloister, thinking ruefully of the good food and peaceful harborage within.

Half an hour more passed, a mere morsel bitten out of the long night through which he must ride, on and on, till dawn should find him close to the walls of Orléans—a royal city, far beyond Blois, and a haven where the king's law would protect him. But there were hours of the saddle, hours of ceaseless vigilance, before he could reach the city nestled in the clasp of the Loire.

A thin, clear sound tinkled through the night. A moment he listened; then he pulled in the weary roan. From far down the road to the north—in his very path—came the faint jingle of mail, and under it the staccato pound of many hoofs. It was far ahead, but he was out in the open now—between him and those unseen lay no hiding-place, no shred of cover, only the great, flat plain with its young gardens and new crops.

The troop ahead must be hostile, for he was now within the very heart of that country over which Thibault of Champagne ruled from his eyrie of Blois. He must ride back and shelter either in the monastery or in the wood; else they who rode toward him would overwhelm him. The dozen that followed he had put off the scent.

He swung about, and the brave roan burst into a gallant spurt, which for a little seemed to have all the swiftness of fresh strength. And that little was just enough. For, as he glimpsed the first lights of the monastery again, his ears caught the drum of hoofs from the south, riding down the very bridle-path by which he had come so short a time before.

He had not thrown them off the scent after all—they had picked the very spot where they would force him from the highway; their occasional spurts had been so timed as to drive him either to take shelter with the monks or to ride straight into the ambush laid for him just past the cloister.

They hadoutguessed him, outmaneuvered

him, driven him to earth as dogs drive a fox! And there was but one thing he could do—take to earth in the refuge they had chosen for him, out of which they could dig him at their leisure.

Having no choice, he took the one course open; it would at least give him a little time, since his foes would not dare drag him from a house of God. He turned into the road that led to the wide stone portal of La Ferté, with the tumult of pursuit so close that, but for their own noise, those who had followed all day must have heard him.

His knock roused the porter, an old gray monk yawning with sleep, and he was admitted instantly, though with a frown at his gay garb. Only the clergy scowled at troubadours. His horse was led to the stables, but he would not have it unsaddled.

"But you are weary, and your beast near exhaustion!" the hospitable porter protested.

"The abbot!" Cercamon interrupted. "For Heaven's sweet grace, I must speak with your abbot at once! There are enemies on my heels!"

The startled monk crossed himself with trembling fingers and broke into a hobbling run. As fast as his stiff legs would carry him he hastened down the corridor, into the cloistered court and to the abbot's cell. In an agony of impatience Cercamon waited, imagining his two-fold foe surrounding the monstery while he bided the coming of the father superior. But it was scarce three minutes before the abbot's tall, emaciated form appeared in the doorway.

He was a commanding old man, in gray gown and black apron, with features sharp with fasting and eyes that glowed with the indomitable spirit of Christ's warrior.

Cercamon fell on one knee and drew from his bosom the letter sealed with the great seal of Aqutaine.

"My father," he began anxiously, "I am ambassador from the Duchess of Aquitaine to his holiness the Abbot Suger, Regent of France. Armed men, unrighteously violating the peace of this province, seek to intercept me and seize my despatches. It matters little what becomes of me, but it will be ill for France and for the Church if these letters do not reach the regent. I pray you, help me!"

The abbot took the letter from Cercamon's hand, examined the seal and read the superscription.

"It were ill indeed," he commented, "if messages of weight for the noble Suger fell into the hands of evil men. But how am I to know that such an event would injure Holy Church and not rather your mistress, the Duchess of Aquitaine, alone?"

So eager was the troubadour to insure the safety of his despatches that he resolved to entrust their secret to the monk, knowing well that a man of his calling and sanctity would not betray them.

"Because, holy father," he answered, "this letter concerns a marriage between the duchess and the King of France; and Thibault of Champagne, wishing to arrange a marriage between the young prince and his daughter, desires to prevent Aquitaine's offer from reaching the regent's ears. Your holiness knows how disastrous for the Cistercian order would be an alliance between Champagne and the Crown. Your houses are all within Thibault's territories; he would levy a heavy tax on every monastery to raise the dowry which the king would demand, and your pious order would be shaken to its foundations by the demand on its resources."

The abbot eyed him sternly.

"The Count of Champagne has always been our order's benefactor," he retorted. "This very house is within his territory. And your late duke, Guilhem X, was a heretic and an enemy of the true faith!"

Cercamon was prepared for this.

"The late Duke Guilhem reconciled himself with the Church, and under the guidance of your order's pillar, the holy Bernard, renounced his heresy. He died in the odor of sanctity, on a pilgrimage to Compostella. Your holiness surely would not take the responsibility for preventing a letter of greatest weight to the State from reaching Abbot Suger, the truest friend in France to both Church and throne?"

This shot told. Grateful as all Cistercians were to Thibault of Champagne for lands and money, they were even more devoted to the Crown. No pious churchman would suppress a letter to the regent, whose holiness and incorruptibility made him the Church's shield against the barons.

"What shall I do to help you?" the Abbot asked.

"Send this letter, by a safe hand, to the regent!" Cercamon answered. "A monk of your order—which has never meddled with the rivalries of princes—can pass

unmolested even through embattled camps. But send the bearer secretly, by night, so that those who follow me shall not see him. And further, I pray you send a message to my master also, the Count of Armagnac, who is now in Poitiers. Tell him that I have been pursued, perhaps seized; and that his letters have gone on to Abbot Suger by one of the monks under your rule."

"It were well," the abbot reflected, "for the messengers to depart at once."

But this was not what Cercamon desired.

"They who lie in wait for me," he objected, "are even now close to your walls, whose thickness alone has prevented the clatter of their mail from reaching your ears. It were well to wait till they have passed, or——"

His words were smothered in a sudden shout from the darkness without, by the thunder of hoofs and a challenging cry.

"THEY are here!" Cercamon gasped, clutching the wide sleeve of the abbot's gown. "They expected to seize me before this, but I eluded them. Now those who followed me have met with the troop which lurked ahead. They drove me to take shelter here, and will demand me at——"

A lance-butt thundered on the door. Seizing the troubadour's shoulder, the abbot dragged him off into the darkness of the cloistered court.

"We will hide you," he whispered, "till they have gone!"

"They will not go!" Cercamon protested. "They know I am here, and need only wait till I am forced to come out. I must surrender to them; do you get my messages through—to the regent, and to Armagnac!"

The iron-bound door quivered beneath the impact of beating spears. At a sign from the abbot, the trembling porter tottered to the archway, fumbling with his great keys. The iron lock screeched, and the door flew open. Mailed men, their armor gleaming in the faint flare of the porter's rushlight, swarmed into the corridor.

The abbot came forward from the darkness of the cloister within which Cercamon still stood concealed.

"What seek ye, men of violence?" he upbraided them. "This is God's house!"

A thick-set officer thrust himself forward from the knot of men-at-arms, concealing his uneasiness under a swagger.

"We be king's men!" he answered. "We seek a strolling jongleur, who bears treasonable letters! Deliver him to us, or it will go ill with your house!"

The abbot raised his wooden crucifix, which dangled from a long chain of carven beads.

"It is rather you who are traitors!" he rebuked them. "If ye were honest soldiers of France, ye would bear its colors, instead of prowling through the night with no device upon your breasts, like thieves and outlaws. And if ye disturb this house, I will cast upon you the Church's ban, the curse of the unextinguishable flame and the worm that is not appeased! Go hence, and respect Christ's altar!"

The officer flinched. Bloody and ruthless as the times were, few men were so bold as to defy excommunication, with its threat of eternal torture. But, frightened to the core of his superstitious soul, he still clung to his purpose. His men were less daring; they crowded together as if seeking courage from contact with one another, and their eyes were downcast.

"It matters not to you whether we ride with or without badge of service," the officer resumed doggedly, "whether we be king's men or outlaws. Yet I spoke in haste, and will not molest your roof. But we demand the body of him who we know has taken refuge here; and if you refuse him to us, we will quarter ourselves upon you till ye surrender him!"

This was a threat that would be fulfilled; and both the abbot and the listening Cercamon knew it. Once the unruly soldiers had free run of the monastery, Cercamon could not excape, nor could the monks who bore his messages pass through their lines. Therefore the troubadour, who had already formed his decision, advanced from his shelter into the dimly lighted corridor. So swift was his approach that the officer started back at sight of him. But straightway every soldier laid hand on sword, and the mass of them moved forward to seize their prisoner.

Cercamon raised both hands as a sign that he meditated no resistance. His fingers itched for his sword-hilt, and he knew his skill with his weapon was great enough to take more than one or two with him into darkness. But his deeply religious soul shrank from bloodshed in a holy place.

"I can not escape," he said bluntly, "therefore I yield. But beware how ye lay hands on me, for I am a troubadour, whose blood not even kings dare shed!"

The soldiers, straining like hounds in leash, looked to their leader. Smiling his satisfaction, the officer answered:

"You have chosen wisely and saved us much mischief. Our orders are to take you, not to harm you, and we are glad indeed not to have your blood on our hands. To him, lads!"

The next instant Cercamon was seized, spun about, disarmed, pawed over by a dozen hands. His cloak, tunic, mail shirt, undertunic and hose were stripped from him, till he stood mother-naked between the jubilant troopers and the indignant abbot.

"Ha!" cried the officer, who had been rummaging through his captive's garments. "The clever fox thought to hide his booty, but a cunning old hound smelled it out!"

And he waved in one hand a folded and creased parchment, which he had rifled from Cercamon's hose. This parchment was an exact duplicate of the letter which Cercamon had given the abbot and which he had kept hidden between hose and footsole. An expression of consternation flitted over the abbot's face; but Cercamon turned his head ever so slightly and made a grimace of reassurance. Then he let his eyes meet the officer's, and his face was the picture of utter dismay. At sight of his long visage the soldiers burst into mocking laughter.

"We have what we came for, lads!" the leader exulted. "Truss him up now, and be swift!"

In a few moments Cercamon was clothed again—the rough hands of the spearmen forcing his garments on in utmost disorder—his hands were bound behind his back, he was gagged and his head muffled in a bag whose meshes were just coarse enough to let him breathe, but shut out the light. Two stalwart troopers dragged him to the door, flung him out, lifted him up into a saddle and lashed his feet fast under a horse's belly.

It was not his own horse; but he soon realized that his beloved roan had not been left in the cloister stables. The commander of the troop was on its back, as his loud oaths of satisfaction proclaimed. Cercamon would have gritted his teeth if the gag had permitted, for the beast was the apple of his eye.

A COMMAND rang out; the horses began to move, and fourscore hoofs pounded away into the fresh spring night. His senses darkened more by the bag over his face than by the darkness, Cercamon knew not which direction they took. He only knew that he was in the rearmost rank and that his beast trotted with the often broken gait of the led horse. Yet his wits told him that he rode toward Blois and the dungeons of Count Thibault of Champagne.

The pace was swift, for his captors were anxious to have the business done with. Cercamon knew that the reason they did not wear their master's colors was that Thibault hoped to conceal from public knowledge his double crime—interference with an embassy to the Regent, and violation of the sacred person of a troubadour. If it should be discovered, he would have both the Regent and the troops of Aquitaine to reckon with; and his assault on a troubadour would set France—the south at least—on fire against him.

He played a desperate game, and Cercamon gave him ungrudging admiration for the skill with which he had played it. Thibault's men had plainly been carefully instructed not to hunt down their quarry on the soil of Touraine—which would have meant a quarrel with Anjou—but to chase him into the territory of Blois and lure him into the monastery of La Ferté.

The monks, who depended for protection on Thibault, might be presumed to say nothing. But to be sure that they said nothing Thibault's men gave themselves out as royal troops and wore no device.

And if they met others on the road, the fact that they wore no device would prevent their deed from being imputed to Thibault. Once their prisoner was safe in Blois, Thibault could deny all knowledge of his existence, and no one would dare accuse him without proof. To the eye these troopers were no man's men, probably marauders. To the casual glance—and nothing else was possible in the dark—Cercamon, whose face was hidden and over whose gay garments a coarse fustian robe had been lashed, was a mere captive about whose fate no one cared.

The troop had ridden perhaps an hour when Cercamon was aware of a faint red glow through the meshes of the bag and of a ringing challenge in a broad, thick-tongued French. With a shout of joy the troop

answered it as one man. Weapons clattered, horses neighed, voices talked back and forth. The red glow grew till Cercamon could catch the shine of metal against it when he faced it directly. It was a huge fire high above the ground, a watch-fire on one of those squat, outlying towers that are the vedettes of fortified cities.

The voices died down, the troop rode on, the glow faded. On and on they trotted. The dawn breeze was in the air, and cocks crowing, when again the riders reined in, new challenges floated clear from some far height. The hoarse voice of the captain answered. There was a loud laugh from that height whence the challenge had rung; a horrible screech of iron rent the air.

Then, moving forward at a walk up a steep slope, the cavalcade advanced across a wooden bridge that rang hollow under their hoofs. The fresh air was shut out by thick walls; again the screech of metal announced the raising of the drawbridge they had just crossed. Fingers fumbled at Cercamon's neck, the coarse bag slid across his features, the light rushed in upon his dazzled eyes.

It was only the half-light of a great archway at early morning, but after his double darkness he felt it strike him like a whiplash across the eyes. It was some moments before his sight adjusted itself, and then he saw that the archway was the main gate of a large castle, whose outer bailey opened directly off the gate.

The wall was a good eighteen feet thick of squared masonry, and in the center of the court beyond he saw the massive base of a square tower, with rectangular turrets jutting out from each corner. Then the ropes that bound his feet were cut, he was dragged from his horse and fell, saddle-worn and unable to stand, in a heap on the flagstones.

A knot of men-at-arms surrounded him, some wearing no badges—and these were the men who had brought him—others flaunting the arms of Champagne. One fell to chafing the prisoner's ankles, till the blood began to sting unbearably in his constricted veins. After a time they raised him, and forced him to walk up and down, all the while railing at him. When he could keep his feet without help, a soldier grasped him by the shoulder and led him across the court toward the tower.

It was chilly in the court, for the sun had not yet risen above the crenellated walls. In the wooden stalls built around two sides of the bailey, horses nickered, smelling the hay being borne to them by bare-armed grooms. Red-cheeked maid-servants chattered and laughed about the well or swung lithely away with buckets balanced on their heads. A smell of cooking drifted from the soldiers' quarters. An unseen cow lowed, and chickens cackled. On the battlements a soldier sang.

Exhausted, Cercamon stumbled to the inner portal, the entrance to the tower or keep. The iron-bound door of massive oak was flung open, and his guide shoved him roughly into a guard-room, bare, bleak, lighted only by two high arrow-slits in the walls. A dozen men-at-arms in unbraced tunics were washing the sleep from their eyes or yawning as they waited their turn at the tub of well-water that stood on a crude bench.

Their beds—mere mats of straw laid over other benches—lay along two walls; beside the door stood a chest of arms, with a recruit squatting by it burnishing the mail of his older comrades. A pointed archway in the rear wall led to an inner room, which Cercamon guessed to be the great hall, with its long tables and its stairway leading to the upper stories.

But he was not to enter that room yet. His guide's hand impelled him to a dark opening that yawned, without railing, in the guard-room floor. A shout of laughter rang from the lolling men-at-arms.

"Another bird for the cage, eh, Simon?" one cried, and the soldier nodded.

"There is room, I trust?" he asked with assumed solicitude. "This bird is of fine plumage, as ye see, and his feathers must not be ruffled." Grinning, he dragged Cercamon down a dark stair into a musty vault that reeked with damp and bad air.

A murky torch advanced from the blackness to meet them, and metal clinked dully. He who bore the light was a squat, thick-set fellow in stained leather, with a bunch of keys dangling from his belt and a short, broad sword by his side.

"Look to him well," the soldier cautioned. "If he escapes, the old Bear will set up a new gallows on the wall. Thou hast not smelt fresh air for so long that it would choke thee—especially from a rope's end."

And he sprang up the stairs, leaving Cercamon to the warder's care.

The latter led the troubadour to a row

of cells in the solid wall of the keep. A key whined in a rusty lock; a heavy door grated open, and he was thrust within. The warder's hand guided him to a corner; strong fingers clutched his ankles and locked them in massy fetters.

"You will be fed in an hour," the warder muttered, and disappeared.

The door clanged shut after him, and the key turned in the lock.

Though he was desperately hungry, panting for drink, and sore in every bone, Cercamon grinned to himself in the blackness of his cell. He had reason to grin; for he had tricked the men who had tricked him, outwitted those who had made him prisoner. When he surrendered himself at the monastery, and his hose had been despoiled of the latter he had hidden, he had pretended consternation. But the captured letter had gone far to insure the success of his mission.

IT HAD been at Cercamon's request that the Duchess Aliénor had let her clerk draw up two copies of the despatches to Suger and had signed both with her seal. If he had borne but one, and that one had not been found on his person, his captors would have searched every man and every corner in the monastery. But having found one copy on him, in a hiding-place which looked to have been chosen with a view to keeping it secret, Thibault's troopers had assumed that they had found that which they sought.

With these papers in his hands and their bearer safely under lock and key, the Count of Champagne would have no idea that the message, borne by a monk, was already on its way to Paris. Provided he were set free before prison broke his strength, Cercamon cared not how long he might lie in Thibault's cells. He cared only for the success of his mission; and he had already seen to that.

Nor did he fear greatly for his own life or comfort. He was a troubadour, known throughout France as its finest singer. What baron of that song-loving nation would let such a voice molder in his dungeons?

Cercamon's thoughts were so merry that he scarce heeded how time passed, till the great door screeched again and the warder's torch flared in its opening.

"Food!" the keeper muttered and, shoving a plate and a stone bottle within reach of his prisoner's corner, he stepped behind him.

The next moment Cercamon felt a steel point prick the base of his neck and understood that he was to sit motionless while the warder cut the bonds from his hands. He did so and soon was able to move his arms. With a nimble backward spring the jailer leaped out of his reach and slammed the door. But he need not have feared, for the prisoner's arms were still numb from their lashings.

When they pricked and tingled with new life, Cercamon examined his breakfast, a loaf of bread and a crock of water. The water was stale, the bread moldy.

"Pah!" he cried, and flung the food from him.

The blithe mood left him all at once, for he had not eaten in six-and-twenty hours, and the disappointment sickened him. He sat motionless, gritting his teeth.

In this attitude he was found when, about noon, the door opened again; but this time it was not the jailer who entered. It was a brace of spearmen with brightly glowing torches that lighted up the bare, damp cell, with the water trickling down its walls, the rotten straw on its stone floor and the disheveled prisoner with his despondent face and fettered ankles.

After the men-at-arms entered a big-boned man in middle age, clad in black velvet hose and tight-fitting tunic. The torchlight fell on his rugged, square face, florid with good living and scarred with battle, on a short, curling white beard and on the rich golden embroidery of his black surcoat. With obvious intent he stood so that the light illumined the golden device—the coronetted arms of Champagne, quartered with those of Blois.

Though he had never seen the man before, Cercamon knew him from his dress, his fierce, majestic features and the arrogance of his carriage. This was indeed Thibault of Champagne, the greatest baron of the North. Brother to King Stephen of England, he now cherished the ambition to become father-in-law to the King of France and so to make himself the mightiest uncrowned prince in Europe.

For a long time the two eyed each other in silence, and it was Cercamon who spoke first.

"Your grace will forgive me that I do not rise," he said, with courtesy so deep as almost to be insulting. "I am prevented by these adornments with which your grace had honored my legs."

And he pointed to his chains.

Count Thibault laughed, a rolling, good-natured laugh which thundered back from the stone vaulting of the dungeon.

"One sees that you are indeed Cercamon the Troubadour!" he answered.

His eyes examined his captive, noting the mighty shoulders, the unnaturally long arms, whose sinews showed through his rumpled, tight-fitting sleeves, and the handsome face with its blue-green eyes, that glowed like coals in the torchlight.

"I am sorry," the count spoke again, with courtesy to match Cercamon's own, "that my men were forced to handle you so. My spies reported you a perilous man, shrewd of wit and a master with the sword. It would not have been wise to give you an equal chance. Moreover, I had to take you alive and uninjured. It goes ill with him who slays one of your calling."

Cercamon nodded.

"Your grace will do me the justice to admit that I gave little trouble. I did not even draw weapon."

Thibault's eyes clouded.

"So my men reported," he mused. "It is that which disturbs me. It is unlike your reputation. You are said to be a man who fights for the love of fighting, kills when the odds are even and never gives up a task unfinished. Therefore I suspect that you have not begun to fight me yet."

"Perhaps your grace is right," Cercamon admitted demurely. "But it was not hospitable of you to feed me on foul bread and lodge me in a stinking pit."

"That was only that you might the more appreciate the kindness I still hope to show you. But I can not treat like a guest a man who may meditate some dangerous plot against me. It rests with you, troubadour, whether you lie on slimy stone and gnaw foul crusts or sleep in a fair bed and share my table.

He paused, searching Cercamon's face the while.

Now Cercamon, confident that his message would go through to Abbot Suger, and being raw with famine and ill treatment, saw no cause for prolonging his own discomfort. He had done all in his power; the rest lay with the regent and Bertrand d'Armagnac.

"Your conditions?" he asked.

Thibault smiled.

"Merely those which I can enforce with or without your consent," he replied. "You shall have the freedom of my castle and be treated with all honor—if you will but give me your parole of honor."

"And that means?"

"That you will not try to escape, nor communicate to any man those things which have happened to you at my order, nor speak a word of the errand that brought you from Poitiers, until I let you leave my castle."

Cercamon reflected a moment, but could not see that these terms could do any harm. Already a monk was on his way to Paris with the all-important despatches, and another had set out for Poitou to bring word of Cercamon's probable plight to his master. And it was true that, if he refused, Thibault could insure his obedience by keeping him a miserable captive in this noisome cell. He looked up suddenly, grinning.

"I accept, my lord," he said, "and I give you my word."

"Strike the chains from his limbs!" the Count commanded. "You, Gilles, take him to the north chamber and give him fine garments. You, Watrequin, hie to the servants' offices and bring him good meat and drink! And now, troubadour, remember your promise well—for tonight King Louis of France sups with me!"

THE king came at nightfall, his approach heralded by the thunder of galloping hoofs and the sudden swoop of horsemen, who checked their fiery mounts in mid-career, flinging them back on their haunches at the very brink of the moat. Then rang the challenge from the walls and a fanfare of royal trumpets. It was half an hour afterward before the young monarch, with his escort of three hundred spears, rode with slow majesty across the lowered drawbridge. Louis of France loved to be well prepared for and always sent his *avant-garde* well ahead, that his welcome might be worthy his acceptance.

The great gate was open, the drawbridge down. The royal procession rode over splendid carpets from the looms of Arras, between lines of full-mailed men-at-arms. Thibault himself stood in the archway, bareheaded, bowing low. From the battlemented crest of the wall maidens dropped flowers upon the heads of the king and his knights. Beside the count stood his master

of the garrison, Raymond de Montivre, armored from top to toe, but with his nasaled helmet in his hand.

Louis was a tall, slender lad of scarce twenty, with short, dark hair and dark eyes that blazed out of a pale face. His features had not yet assumed that austere reserve which, in later years, grief and misfortune stamped upon them; now, in his fiery youth, he had learned to conceal neither his swift, sensitive emotions nor his overbearing pride. A slight smile curled his thin lips as he acknowledged Thibault's obeisance; it pleased him to see the haughty Count of Champagne humbling himself. And he embraced Thibault with a graciousness born of that pleasure.

The two, attended by Montivre, crossed the bailey toward the tower, while the king's men rode slowly into the court and gave over their beasts to the bustling grooms who were in despair to find room for so many horses in the castle stables.

Conducted thus ceremoniously to his chamber on the third floor of the keep, Louis the King was left to the ministrations of the cringing castle servants; and Thibault, with a smile of triumph lighting his florid face, sought out Cercamon in the north turret. Cercamon was washed, fresh-shaven and habited in gay garments of Thibault's furnishing. The count entered without announcing himself.

"You are mindful of your parole?" he asked.

"My lord!" Cercamon exclaimed. "They call you the Bear of the North, but there is as much fox as bear in you. Had you told me of the king's coming before you offered me parole, I would never have promised to keep silent before him. But having given my word, I will keep it."

Thibault laughed.

"That is well! Tonight, at supper, you are to sing before the King!"

The troubadour raised his eyebrows.

"You can not command song, my lord."

Thibault shrugged his shoulders.

"I can outwit you, but I can not argue with you," he answered. "I pray you to sing before the king, if that pleases you better."

Cercamon bowed.

"What songs?" he asked. "The north does not know much of our southern poesy. I would not choose verses that the king will not approve."

Once more the count laughed.

"See what an advantage I have, in that I know the king!" he exulted. "When Aquitaine wished to contract a royal marriage, it sent its offer, by a minstrel, to a monk. Truly that monk is Regent of France, but for all that he is a shaveling. If your letters had reached Suger, the king would have been enraged that his marriage should have been arranged over his head. Now I, knowing his pride, his ceaseless chafing against the tutelage of Suger, sent my proposal for a marriage between the king and my daughter to Louis himself—and he is here tonight to see the lass! Ah, you southerners are brave soldiers and rare singers, but ye are no statesmen!

"Likewise the foremost troubadour of France, being a southerner, has to ask me—a northern soldier—what to sing before the King. Knowing him, I can tell you. He is young, proud, hot-headed. Sing him songs of war and brave deeds—songs of chivalry in arms! Your whining love-ballads will not touch him, nor your dainty *pastorelles* of shepherds and shepherdesses. What are peasants, sheep and light-o'-loves to the son of Louis the Strong? Nay, pour out your fiercest notes and sing him of the clash of sword on shield!"

Cercamon's eyes were flashing, but less with the kindling words of the man who had beaten him than with anger at his own helplessness to strike back. He had given his word to say nothing to the king, either of his own capture or of the Duchess Aliénor's letters. And while he must sit silent, bound by his honor, Thibault would be using every art, every persuasion, to knit up a marriage between his daughter and the king. And to crown all, he, Cercamon, ambassador of Aquitaine, must sing to make them merry—must sing over the funeral of Aquitaine's proud hopes!

A sudden suspicion crossed the count's cunning mind.

"Ye troubadours are cunning fellows!" he said. "See to it that your songs contain no suggestion, no single hint, against the spirit of your parole!"

"My lord!" Cercamon cried proudly. "If we were both on the open plain, my sword would avenge that insult to my honor, baron though you are!"

The nobleman's rough-hewn face softened into contrition.

"Your pardon!" he replied. "I had

forgotten the courtesy that becomes a host. You will sing for us?"

"I will," Cercamon agreed.

But when he was left alone, he pondered long on Thibault's request, turning it over and over to find what hidden meaning, what cunning scheme, might lie beneath it. 'I can outwit you,' Thibault had said; and so far he was justified in his boast.

The troubadour had countered his first clever stroke—the ambush—by a cleverer parry, which the count did not yet suspect; but it had been shrewd of Thibault to lure him into that ambush. And Thibault had indeed outwitted him in the matter of his parole. But in this last request Cercamon could see nothing, save that the count wished to put the petulant Louis in a good mood, a mood that would make him more receptive to Thibault's proposals.

And a great flame of anger swept over Cercamon, that, in spite of all his caution, for all that he could do, the Bear of Champagne had beaten him and made a plaything of him.

If he could only tell the king all—that he, an ambassador on business of state from Aquitaine to France, had been ambushed by Thibault's men; that Thibault had intercepted, by force, a messenger who came with proposals that concerned the king, and even now sought to inveigle Louis into a pledge of marriage before Aquitaine's proposal could reach the royal ears—if he could only tell Louis this, the proud young prince would flame into righteous indignation, sweep Thibault and all Thibault's designs from his path and avenge a deed that was as much an insult to his royal dignity as to the pride of Aquitaine.

But cunning Thibault had sealed Cercamon's lips till he should be permitted to leave the castle of Blois. And then it would be too late, for Thibault would not let him go till the marriage between Champagne and the Crown should have been agreed upon.

But Cercamon was not the man to give all for lost while life still surged through his veins and his shrewd wits yet had something to feed on. There was always some way out of every trap, some weak link in every chain. As he pondered, it suddenly came to him that the weak link in Thibault's chain was the proposal that Cercamon, whom Thibault had hindered from fulfilling an errand that concerned the king, should now sing before the King.

True, he could not weave into his song anything that would violate his promise; but at some future time, Louis would know how Thibault had intrigued to keep the Aquitanian offer from his ears and then the king would remember that Cercamon had sung for him at Blois. Yes, it would be too late then—but something might happen in the mean time, if the monk of La Ferté had safely reached Paris and the regent.

This was as far as Cercamon could think the situation out, and he gave his mind to the choice of songs he would sing. Shortly after, a white-clad usher came to summon him to supper.

HE FOUND the bailey bright with torchlight and thronged with officers of the garrison and the knights who had come with the king. The great castle was crowded. Every chamber was filled, and from every turret men were flocking toward the keep. They walked by twos and threes, or in groups, talking animatedly, so that the courtyard rang with the strident hum of their voices.

Entering the tower, Cercamon followed the throng through the guard-room into the great hall, which occupied three-fourths the space of the first floor. It was a huge, high-ceiled room; its cold stone walls hung with Flemish tapestries that billowed in the draft from the arrow-slits. A score of banners, tattered and bloodstained, hung from the rafters; wood and broidered silk alike were dark with the accumulated smoke of the Winter fires that had risen from the hearth in the south corner; soot lay thick on the finely carven woodwork of the galleries which ran high up along each wall, for the archers posted to serve the arrow-slits.

Long tables—mere rectangles of deal laid on trestles—were ranged one beyond the other across the hall; one stood high on a daïs at the western end of the apartment, under the crossed standards of Champagne and France. Servants had already covered the bare boards with the finest napery of the province; splendidly molded flagons of silver stood, brimful with the rarest wines, at each table's end.

The busy sewers and ushers picked their way through the gathering crowd, the former shouting orders to the harassed servants, the latter striving valiantly to direct each guest to his appointed place. Their task was no light one; wo to them if,

however many the guests, they failed to seat each in his due order of precedence, taking into account his birth, title and years of service.

Now Thibault of Champagne had done a bold thing; he had ordered Cercamon assigned to a place at that highest table on the daïs, the master's table, where he himself, his household and the king would sit. In the south the troubadour, as a matter of right, could claim a seat at the master's board; but here in the ruder north, where his art was still new, it was perilous for a low-born man, though he were a troubadour, to mingle on familiar terms with men of gentle blood.

But both Thibault and the young king knew by repute the fame of Cercamon, and Thibault knew he could keep his own proud vassals in order.

The great ones were already seated while yet their followers poured in, and as each entered and made obeisance to the daïs king and count bowed acknowledgment. With some trepidation Cercamon took his place at one end of that high table, after his low bow had been returned and the count had signed to him to sit.

Thibault himself had given up his own place of honor—in the middle of the western side, overlooking the entire company—to Louis the King. On the king's right was Thibault; on his left, Thibault's daughter, the young Countess Alys. Beyond her sat de Montivre, master of the garrison, and the foremost of the king's and of Thibault's knights filled up the remaining places.

When all were seated, the servants came down between the tables in solemn procession, each bearing his appointed dish. Peacocks, roasted whole, their feathers carefully replaced as in life, rested on platters of silver; suckling pigs crisp and sleek; rich stews of mutton in deep bowls, spiced with every known delicacy; great mounds of grilled beef in thick slabs—all these followed, in the order of importance assigned them by fashion. The guests were already drinking, as they would all through the meal.

Accustomed to the refined luxury of the south, Cercamon paid scant attention to all these preparations and less to his wine, sipping only when the king drank, as was proper. All his attention was focused on the girl who sat at Louis' left, through whom her father had destined to unite the fortunes of Champagne with those of France.

She was a tall young woman, strongly made, yet graceful, perhaps a little older than the king. Her hair was brown, her eyes blue. It would have been flattery to call her beautiful. Yet her gaze was clear, frank and innocent, and both her features and her bearing bore the fine, subtle stamp of goodness. She seemed a little melancholy; though her lips and chin were firm, her smile was wistful.

"It were a good thing for this young prince," Cercamon meditated, "and for the peace of France, if Thibault should win his game."

For it was plain to any that had seen them both that Alys of Blois surpassed Aliénor of Aquitaine in beauty of soul as much as Aliénor surpassed her in beauty of face and body. In the year past, the troubadour had seen much of his duchess and knew that, far as she stood above other women in loveliness, her heart was filled with pride and cruelty and love of pleasure.

The company ate like men who had fasted for a week. Well might the king's men do so, for they had ridden far in the Spring air; but there was no moderation in their manners. As they ate, so they drank. Cercamon wondered, as he watched them, that these gourmands and the dainty folk of his own land could both be Frenchmen.

So fast they reached their fingers into the stew-bowls, so eagerly they grasped the slabs of meat in their sinewy hands, that the servants had scarce time to bring them towels and ewers of water between courses. Each man seized his food firmly in his left hand, hacked at it with his dagger, and carried it to his mouth in his fingers, washing down the mouthfuls with great gulps of wine. Of all that company only Cercamon, with his fine Gascon manners, the countess and the king, ate daintily or moderately; and Louis drank as sparsely as he ate.

At last the feast was cleared away and the cloths removed, but the flagons, constantly replenished, passed up and down incessantly. Thibault of Champagne rose from his place; a trumpeter behind him blew a blast on a silver horn, and the deep drone of conversation was cut off as by a sword-thrust. The count waved a hand toward Cercamon, who rose and bowed to the king, and with a sardonic smile on his lips, Thibault presented him.

"Many of you," he said, "have exchanged blows with our countrymen of Provence or

Aquitaine; a few have perchance heard their singers in their own courts. But who of us all has heard the voice of Cercamon? It is a high honor I have prepared for my king."

CERCAMON felt every eye fasten upon him; the hot, impatient eye of Louis, full of a boy's curiosity and a boy's restlessness; the gentle, brooding eyes of Countess Alys; the hard, cynical eyes of Thibault; and the unbroken stare of five hundred war-hardened knights of France. These men, untrained to value the polished verse of his southland and flushed with wine—these men he must please. But more than all he must please King Louis; and it was well for him the king was of finer stuff than his nobles.

Remembering his captor's advice, he wasted no time on the gentler, finer forms which most delighted the southern courts, but plunged forthwith into one of those fierce, wild-paced war-songs that had come down to his countryfolk from the battles of their grandsires.

It rang with the clash of sword on shield, the clang of steel, the breathless, thundering rhythm of charging horsemen. So furiously rolled its cadences that, before the company had time to realize, it had come to an end in one fierce, shouted syllable of triumph.

The warriors of France, leaning far over the tables, looked at the singer with eyes that burned with the passion of conflict; then, as at a signal, all caught their breath together, and all burst into wild shouts of applause:

"*Ai! Ai! Ohê!*"

It was the old battle-shout, the cry of martial spirits when the ranks are joined in the reeling ecstasy of onslaught. With these soldier-nobles the troubadour had triumphed.

He stole a glance at the king. Louis sat with tight-locked arms, clenched hands and smoldering eyes.

Now Cercamon had heard, and remembered, a chant of ancient days—a song of Charlemagne and Roland, and the last, lost fight of Roncevaux. It began with slow, measured cadences—the march of the gallant little Frankish army into the black and monstrous pass, a march overhung with the terror of monstrous mountains and with the black clouds of storm and fate.

Into this chant he swept, the rich tones throbbing like tolling bells; then, changing time and volume, he burst into the full fury of the Saracen attack, his voice ringing like finely tempered steel. As the fortune of battle waned and waxed and waned again, so his tones swelled, diminished and rose to the fullness of tempest; at last to die down to a deep, soft death-march, filled with the passion of mourning. Roland was dead, and Oliver, the glory of France, departed.

When he had done, the silence was long and profound; yet in that silence was a tribute greater than the clamor of shouting throats or beating hands. The spell broken at last, there came from somewhere in the hall the sound of a man sobbing; and between the sobs came broken cries:

"The dogs of Saracens! The murdering hounds! Wo, wo over the traitor Ganelon!"

The pent-up emotion of the company burst forth in a mighty peal of laughter. The naïve, half-drunken warrior who had spoken turned suddenly on his table-mates, fierce-eyed; then, as his glance fell on a wine flagon, it blurred again. He reached for the drink with shaking fingers.

The young king seized Cercamon's hand.

"Sung like a man and a soldier!" he cried. "But you, who are of the south, have sung us nothing that is the south's own—nothing that we also have not. I have heard often of the well-turned verses made in Aquitaine—them I would hear!"

For a moment the troubadour was strongly minded to sing one of his own songs; but he determined in favor of one written by a man long dead, a song that he loved above all songs. It was the brave, ironical lament composed by Guilhem IX of Aquitaine, prince, lover, soldier, when he returned beaten and shattered from his inglorious crusade. Lament though it was, there was no open grief expressed in its delicate measures—rather a gentle melancholy that dares to laugh at itself. And this he sang, with its perfect form and subdued, half-cynical passion.

This time the multitude did not applaud. The mood was too fine for their northern perceptions. But the king, scholar and gentleman for all his boyishness, was lifted out of himself into ecstatic admiration.

"So should a brave man bear his sorrow!" he cried. "And well for the prince who has such a troubadour to sing him! Ah, Cercamon, I must have you in Paris!"

And, filling his cup to the brim, he drank Cercamon's health.

DURING the next three days Cercamon derived a grim satisfaction from the subtle game played between Thibault and the king; the count trying by every device to bring his royal guest to a serious discussion of the proposed marriage, and at the same time making every opportunity for him to see and talk with the Countess Alys; while Louis as watchfully avoided all talk of the alliance and sought, by keeping Thibault anxious, to make him increase the sums he had offered as the girl's dowry.

For Louis, however young and hot-headed, had inherited his father's love of a bargain, and it was his duty to replenish the exhausted revenues of France. Moreover, the proud boy took a mischievous delight in his vassal's impatience.

Cercamon had great need of such comfort as he could get, for his anxiety over his own position grew more painful every day. Had his messages got through? Had the monk who bore the duchess's letter reached Abbot Suger? And had Armagnac heard of his danger? The time must soon come when Thibault and the king would reach an agreement, and then the cause of Aquitaine would be lost.

Such a result would be most perilous for Aquitaine: Thibault, her ancient enemy, would become the most powerful man in France next to the king; and the king's power to check his ambition would be overbalanced by his loyalty to a father-in-law. And to make Cercamon's trouble the greater, he could not hide from himself the fact that France would be much the better for just such an alliance with Champagne; and his allegiance to Aliénor was sorely tried by his growing admiration for the frank face and the noble heart of Countess Alys.

But his own pride upheld him. He could not endure being overreached; the trick Thibault had played on him irked his Gascon soul. He must win this game for Aquitaine, if he never played another. And he resolved that if, by any miracle, Thibault's schemes should fail, he would ask his master Armagnac to release him from his vassalage. For if Aliénor of Aquitaine became Queen of France, her ruthless ambition would involve her servants in intrigues that a man of honor could not stomach.

Those three days were spent chiefly in hunting, feasting, and dancing; for so the king willed. To fill his time with merriment was the surest way to prevent Thibault from coming to the point, and thus to whet his eagerness till he offered a greater dowry. The nobles of France were delighted with their entertainment; Louis went about with a thin, strained smile; Thibault grew more and more morose. And Cercamon waited, singing, thinking, fearing.

The evening of the third day the tide seemed to turn in Thibault's favor. That afternoon the royal hunting-party had roused a huge boar, at which Louis rode with his reckless courage. His horse had stumbled just as the boar turned at bay. His horse killed under him, the king had lain a moment helpless, pinned to the ground, with the pig's yellow fangs leering in his face. In that moment Thibault's spear entered the monster's side, and the king was saved.

Louis returned silent, but after supper he was exceptionally gracious to his host. When the women had left the hall and while the wine yet circulated, the king signed to Thibault, who rose with a smile of triumph.

But before they had passed through the door for that private discussion which might settle the kingdom's destiny, the blare of many horns sounding at once brought them back to their seats. An officer from the gate ran into the hall and announced—

"The Count Raoul de Vermandois, Grand Seneschal of France!"

Thibault scowled, and Louis flung himself back in his oaken chair with a gesture of impatience. But a wild thrill of hope shot through Cercamon's heart. A few moments later, Thibault's usher entered backward, bowing low at every other step, his white wand of office waving airily in one hand. Three paces from the king he turned, knelt and cried—

"His mightiness the grand seneschal!"

Raoul de Vermandois, who had entered at his very heels, thrust the usher aside and kissed the king's hand. His back was rudely turned to Thibault, whom he did not love, though they were kinsmen by marriage. With an exclamation of anger, Louis bade his seneschal show deference for their host.

Vermandois, a big-bodied, hot-tempered warrior, turned his hot young eyes on the count's.

"Deference?" cried he. "Deference? To one who intercepts messengers to the Crown

and mishandles the ambassadors of princes?"

But as the last words fell from his lips, he caught sight of Cercamon, sitting at the table's end—Cercamon, richly clothed, well-fed, apparently at liberty and in high favor.

Louis was on his feet, looking angrily from Vermandois to Thibault and back.

"What does this mean, Raoul?" he cried. "Has hatred made you mad, or have you indeed some charge to press against the Count of Champagne?"

The grand seneschal's eyes dropped, and he muttered incoherently. The sight of the troubadour had blunted the keen edge of his fury. At length he composed himself and spoke, though with some uncertainty.

"His excellence the regent, Abbot Suger," he said, "has sent me with four hundred spears to escort your Majesty back to Paris. A messenger has come with tidings that cast grave doubts on Count Thibault's loyalty!"

Every man in the company sprang to his feet, the knights of France with exclamations of wonder; the warriors of Champagne with shouts of defiance, pressing round about the seneschal with threatening scowls and hands plucking at their sword-hilts. For a little it seemed as if they would draw steel and hack the daring accuser in pieces.

But Thibault was also on his feet, his cheeks flaming.

"Does that man live," he roared, "who dares accuse Thibault of Champagne of disloyalty to his king? Raoul, Raoul, if it were not for the royal presence I would cram your lie down your throat with six inches of steel!"

Striding forward, the king caught his angry vassal's arm. His voice silenced every other; his cold, clear words drenched their passions as with water.

"Raoul," he said, "ride back to Paris and say to the regent that he presumes too much on our patience! I will not go back till I am ready. You, Thibault, have this day rendered me a service which of itself confutes this charge."

The grand seneschal blushed purple.

"Your Majesty's will is the will of God!" he answered in a choked voice. "I will go. But first I crave five minutes' private speech with your Majesty, in the interest of France. If I fail to satisfy your Majesty, I will go down on my knees before the Count of Champagne and ask his pardon for my words!"

Thibault strove in vain to catch the King's eye. Louis pondered, his face still angry; but at last he nodded.

"So be it!" he said. "Follow me to my apartments!"

IT WAS nearer half an hour than five minutes before the king returned. In that long, tense interval Thibault waited in angry bewilderment, his eyes turning questioningly from the puzzled knights of Paris to the troubadour. At last, as if making up his mind that the seneschal's charge of disloyalty must have some connection with his captive, he signed to Cercamon, who elbowed through the crowding, whispering throng to the count's side.

"Remember your promise!" Thibault whispered.

Cercamon whispered back:

"I will keep my promise; I will say no word to any man concerning your actions till I have left your roof."

Thibault nodded, as if satisfied. If Cercamon said nothing, he should be safe; for the men who had captured the troubadour had worn no badges and had observed every caution. Yet Thibault was mightily troubled to know what lay behind Raoul's charge that he had intercepted a messenger to the Court.

At last Louis reentered the hall, Vermandois at his side. By the smoldering rage in the king's white face, by the unconcealed grin of triumph on Raoul's, the excited knights could see that Thibault had fared badly in that secret conversation. Louis strode swiftly up to the count, his eyes blazing, and shot one swift question—

"How dare you stop a messenger between Aquitaine and France?"

Thibault recoiled, but his bluff features, long practised in dissimulation, assumed an expression of injury and astonishment. With every air of innocence he asked:

"What means your gracious Majesty? Have I not always been faithful?"

Vermandois sneered openly. Louis, drawing from his breast a rolled parchment, struck it, rather than gave it, into Thibault's hand.

"Read!" he commanded.

The seal was already broken. Unrolling the parchment with fingers that trembled a little for all his forced composure, Thibault read. In spite of his efforts at self-control,

the flush ebbed from his cheeks, and his teeth gritted. The paper was a proposal, from the Duchess Aliénor to the Regent Suger, for a marriage between herself and the king.

"My lord!" Thibault stammered. "This paper—I do not understand. I am accused of intercepting a message, which—" he paused, and gathering firmness, concluded with an air of virtue—"which has not been intercepted at all! For lo, I saw it first in your Majesty's hand!"

The king could not repress his fury.

"You dare to bandy words with me!" he exclaimed. "This letter was brought to the regent by a monk of the Cistercian abbey at La Ferté-en-Bois, who declared that its bearer, the troubadour Cercamon, had entrusted it to his prior but a few minutes before Cercamon was dragged from the abbey by soldiers who wore no badge. And here"—he pointed to Cercamon—"here I find this troubadour in your own castle! What better proof could I ask?"

Thibault raised his eyes to Cercamon's.

"You find him in my castle," he repeated, "but as an honored guest—not as a captive!"

Louis turned to the troubadour.

"How came you hither?" he asked.

His tongue bound by his parole, Cercamon sought for an answer which would not break his word of honor.

"I rode north on an errand of my master, the Duke of Armagnac," he answered slowly. "Meeting with men of Count Thibault's, I yielded to his invitation to pass some time at his court."

Louis stamped his foot.

"What was the nature of your errand?" he demanded.

"Your pardon, my lord! I can not reveal my master's secrets!"

"Do you deny that you bore this letter from the Duchess of Aquitaine as far as La Ferté, and that it was there taken from you?"

"I neither affirm nor deny anything, my lord the king!"

Thibault drew a sigh of relief; but Louis was not satisfied.

"Your case, Raoul," he said to his seneschal, "falls to the ground because the chief witness will not speak, Nevertheless there is sufficient evidence for me to acquit you of your promise to ask the count's pardon. Ride back to Paris and say to the regent that I will return in five days. The Count of Champagne has honored me with a proposal which demands my consideration, and I would consider it under his roof. Take also this troubadour to Paris and find means to make him tell all that he knows!"

Thibault looked most uncomfortable. It did not soothe him to see the king take back the letter from Aquitaine and replace it carefully in his tunic. But he was in no position to protest against the suspicion which rested upon him. The evidence against him was strong, even in the face of Cercamon's silence.

It was certain now—and he cursed himself for failing to foresee such a chance—that Cercamon had outplayed him in that swift scene of ambush and capture at the monastery. Now Cercamon was to be taken to Paris, by the king's order, which Thibault could not countermand. The worst was that as soon as Cercamon left Blois Castle he was free from his parole and would doubtless tell the whole story.

The only comfort was that the king still meant to tarry at Blois; and even that was no longer an unmixed blessing. For Louis would use Aquitaine's offer—now that he knew of it—as a bid against that of Champagne; and Thibault would be forced to increase his own offer. Louis held against him not only Aliénor's terms, which Thibault knew from the duplicate he had captured to offer greater advantage than his own, but also the fact that Thibault had sought to prevent the king from knowing of the Aquitanian proposals.

He was outbid, and he had committed a crime; for immunity and victory he must pay a high price. He must greatly increase the amount he offered as his daughter's dowry, and he resolved to do so as soon as Vermandois and the troubadour should depart.

That night, by royal order, Cercamon slept under guard; and at daybreak the next morning he was roused by one of the seneschal's spearmen. Raoul had no desire to wait one hour longer than the condition of his horses demanded; and after a cold breakfast on the remains of last night's banquet, he led his men out under the great gate and toward Paris.

CERCAMON took the road in no happy mood. His message had reached the regent, and he was free from his parole and out of reach of Thibault's vengeance; but he was as yet neither

at liberty nor victorious. The king had ordered him to Paris, whither he had no desire to go. He could see no advantage for Aquitaine in his telling his tale to the regent: the king's willingness to remain under Thibault's roof after he knew of the count's treachery was proof that Louis meant to balance the offer of Aquitaine against that of Champagne.

Thus forced to the wall, Thibault could hardly do anything but make so high a bid that Louis would be tempted. Nor was Aquitaine in a position to raise its own bid, seeing that Cercamon, alone of those who favored Aquitaine, knew what had just taken place at Blois. It might well be that, in the absence of a second and larger offer from Aliénor, the king would contract the alliance with Thibault's daughter. In Paris Cercamon would be helpless to inform either his master Armagnac or the duchess of what had happened.

He was still a prisoner, though in honorable captivity. Raoul meant to carry out the king's order and take him to the capital, and had therefore placed him between two keen-eyed young knights, with whom it was a point of honor to watch him with ceaseless vigilance. They rode close by his side, and before and behind them were hundreds of men-at-arms to lend authority to their watchfulness. Yet Cercamon did not despair of eluding them if the slightest chance offered itself. And he was determined to make the chance if none came of itself, for the only hope for Aquitaine lay in his escaping to bring word to the duchess of that which was going on at Blois.

His own horse had been returned to him, and he trusted to its swiftness—if he could only win past his guards. He stole constant sidelong glances at the horses on either side of him, measuring as well as he could their probable speed and endurance. And thus the huge cavalcade cantered down the high road to Paris, in the chilly morning, through the bright noon, and in the cold twilight.

But with twilight a soft, persistent rain began to fall. The seneschal cursed furiously. At night so large a company must ride slowly, and there would be three hours more of drenching, chilling wet and of gradually worsening roads before they reached the shelter of Orléans, the first stopping-point of their three-day journey. Vermandois let his trumpets sound, and the horsemen made the most of the last light for a gallop that would take them as far toward the shelter of Orléans as possible before night shut down in earnest.

The gathering darkness brought new hope to the troubadour. He rode stirrup for stirrup beside his guards, to lull their suspicions. On his left were two men—one of the knights set to watch him, and another; on his right but the one guard, for they rode in column of fours. But on the right was also the river Loire, not easily forded in the dark and the rain. Yet it was on the right that Cercamon watched for his opportunity; it would be impossible to break past the two on his other side. Let his man but lag behind a little, let his horse stumble on the softened, slippery road, and Cercamon was ready to spur past him.

But, as if reading his thoughts, the young noble on his right caught at Cercamon's rein and held it. It was plain that strict orders had been given to prevent his escape. And once they reached Orléans, escape would be impossible. During the night he would be guarded closely, within walls whereon sentries would be posted; and the ride from Orléans to Paris would be through royal domain all the way, with king's troopers patrolling the roads.

They were still half a league from Orléans when the opportunity came. Cercamon was waiting for it with bated breath and did not let it slip. In the black darkness, the man on his right rode full into a deep crevice in the road, filled with rain-water. His horse stumbled, slithered and went down. Taken wholly unaware, the knight let Cercamon's bridle drop from his fingers as he clutched madly at his own; Cercamon tugged his beast's head sharply to the right, thrust home the spurs and shot past the fallen man into the night.

Hearing him dash by, his warder set up a shout, which was instantly echoed by those on the other side. Confused cries rang out; trumpets blew; the whole cavalcade drew raggedly to a halt. Officers rode down the line, demanding what had happened; those who first learned of the escape rode forward to report. A score of men gave tongue at once; none could see a yard ahead of him in the rain and the blackness; the officers began to curse and strike out.

The tumult lasted long enough so that, when it ceased, Cercamon's hoof-beats were no longer audible on the rain-softened earth.

None could see him; it was only known that he had ridden to the right.

Calling his sergeants together, Vermandois bade them ride off hotspur toward the river, swim it and quarter the fields beyond on a front of more than a hundred yards. It was a desperate task, for the river was rising, and none could see his way to the broken bank. Only the urgency of the king's orders held them to it.

To the river they rode, some crashing over their horses' heads as they failed to take off well at the river's brim; others sinking in unexpected depths, and yet others carried down-stream in the muddy water before they could make a landing on the other side. Yet most of them won across; and then began the blind hunt through soaked meadows and plowed fields, slipping, stumbling, some going down in ditches or deep furrows.

The night bewildered their sense of direction; their mounts, afraid of the wicked footing and excited almost to frenzy by the pricking spurs and the shouting, bolted off to all sides. At last, some thrown and limping, all mired and weary, the troopers returned to report neither sight nor sound of the runaway.

Cercamon had had his own share of perils in his wild dash, but he kept his head, he was not weighted down by armor, and he had the advantage of being the pursued instead of the pursuer. In the murk night that pressed in all about him, he, too, had stumbled; but his horse, recovering on the very margin of the river, had taken off with a splendid leap into the stream.

The roan began to swim at once; and thanks to its rider's lack of mail, it had forty pounds handicap over its followers. Straight across the river it headed, made the opposite shore, floundered awhile in the fields; and the certainty of Cercamon's purpose kept the fine beast's muzzle pointed straight for refuge.

It was a precarious refuge he sought, uncomfortable and fraught with danger; but it was the best at hand. Turning southwest on the farther side of the Loire, he pressed on surely, cautiously, for the Sologne marshes. He scarcely feared being overhauled, knowing that an error of a single foot in estimating his direction from the road would widen to an error of a hundred yards in the first mile, what with darkness, rain, and excitement. But he greatly feared lest Vermandois take the back track, send men over the river at wide intervals and thus set ambushes for him at a score of points. In the Sologne he would have perfect shelter till the pursuit was lost.

The Sologne stretches along the south bank of the river in a vast chain of pools and marshes, with no roads and few and perilous footpaths between. He rode into the reeds after an hour of steady, careful going, and thereafter he let the roan pick its way, taking care only to keep it moving. The horse's sharper sense of danger kept them out of the deep pools and treacherous morasses, though more than once its feet sank deep. Only when he had ridden in so far into this land of hidden death that he felt sure none would dare follow, did Cercamon turn again toward the river.

And now began the worst stage of his adventure. Weary now, his horse lost its first alertness, and again and again Cercamon was forced to dismount and lead it for fear that it would carry him straight into a bottomless quag. A dozen times his feet sank to the knees, and he had to pull himself out as best he could; once he sank suddenly into deep standing water and was nearly drowned before he could find firm ground. But doggedly he worked on, unable to see, yet striving always toward the river.

He came on it at last, just as despair laid hold on him. Mounting to rest his weary legs, he rode straight into a pool, which proved to be an arm of the Loire. But here the ground was mixed clay and sand, fairly firm; and after a few minutes of swimming, the roan bore him to the stream, and to shallow water formed by rising ground, where the beast could wade. A moment later he rode out on to the bank.

He still had to get across the river again, for there was no road along the south bank, and the lurking tentacles of the Sologne thrust out to break the river's edge at a hundred points. Cercamon waited to rest his beast, and then, picking his ford as well as he could in the dark, he half-rode, half-swam to the north bank.

But he did not follow the high road, for to the northeast, somewhere in the night, rode the seneschal and his men, and to the southwest lay Blois. Instead, he rode across the plowed fields, slowly and with the utmost care, hoping to strike one of the roads that lead back into the rich country

of the Orléanais. He had thrown the pursuit off the track, hopelessly; but of this he could not be sure. Yet he knew that they would look for him on the other side, or else believe him drowned in river or marsh.

The first cockcrow shrilled through the chill night before he found a cart-track leading west; and this he took, following it between plowed fields till it wound into a grove. Riding deep into the shelter of the trees, he picketed and blanketed his horse. He himself was young, had often experienced wet and chilly nights in the open, and was soon asleep on the sodden ground, wrapped in his cloak.

HE WAS up at sunrise, hungry and stiff; but the roan was somewhat refreshed. Creeping to the road, Cercamon spied up and down it for a time, but saw no one. There were few hoof-prints in the mud, and such as there were were the broad tracks of peasant's nags. The chase was over, and the quarry saved.

Yet he still rode cautiously, the more so since his way led through Thibault's domain. Straight west he pounded, till he was far enough from Blois to venture on a circuit that would take him safely past. The bend in the Loire between Orléans and Tours was so marked that he could at last take a cross-country short-cut, following, as it were, the bowstring while the river and the highroad formed the bent bow.

Tours was his objective: if his message to Bertrand d'Armagnac had been as successful as that to the Regent, his master would be on the road north to inquire after him; and through Tours Armagnac must pass.

For two days he rode on, no man stopping him; finding food and shelter with the peasants. On the second day, at evening, he rode through the gate of Tours, learning from the sentinels that none from Aquitaine had come that way. But the next morning, less than a league south of the city, he beheld a great cavalcade shining against the Spring sun. By their direction, they could only come from Poitou. And as they drew nearer, he saw the great banner of Aquitaine floating in the van. With a shout of joy he spurred to meet them.

The outriders recognized him with cries of astonishment, and from behind their ranks a horseman rode out to meet him. The nasaled helmet hid his features; but his lean, war-hardened body and centaur's carriage were those of Bertrand d'Armagnac, Seneschal of Aquitaine.

The great man wrung the hand of his friend and servant in an iron grip of fellowship. Then, smiling but asking no questions, Armagnac led him to the front rank of the mainguard. Cercamon gave a gasp of surprize. There, in the midst of mail-clad soldiers, sitting the saddle with the ease of the perfect horseman, sat—his princess, Aliénor herself!

Slipping from the saddle, he kissed her hand. Aliénor laughed, and the sound was like the rippling of a brook. She rode astride, as was women's custom then; her wide cloak was of blue velvet, which well set off her bright cheeks and glowing golden hair, caught up in a net of twisted silver. Cercamon, himself and his beast plastered with the mud of the Sologne, made a sorry sight.

"When Cercamon is hard pressed, his duchess herself can not sit idle at home!" she smiled at him.

Bertrand d'Armagnac grinned wryly.

"Do not believe her grace!" he scoffed. "She followed not out of favor to thee, but from sheer mischief and love of peril!"

Aliénor motioned the troubadour to ride by her side.

"Now tell me!" she commanded; and as they rode on toward Tours, he told of all that had befallen him.

"Why, thou art fit to be one of the twelve peers of Charlemagne!" she applauded, but Armagnac only laughed.

"It was well done to choose Cistercians for your messengers," he approved. "None dares stop the Gray Monks; no, not Thibault himself, who has befriended them till their grant abbot has grown mightier than he. Word of your plight reached us two days ago, and we rode north as fast as we could collect two hundred spears. The duchess would not remain behind; there is some devilry brooding behind that angel's smile of hers."

Aliénor laughed again.

"In truth," she explained, "we ride for Paris, to lay complaint before the king concerning Thibault's treatment of you, and to demand justice. But since the king is in Blois——"

"Since the king is in Blois," Armagnac interrupted, "he will doubtless marry Thibault's daughter, and our project will

be lost. Thibault will see to that. But you are weary, my lady, and well-nigh starved. Yonder looms the gate of Tours. We will talk more of this matter over the meat and wine."

WHEN Thibault of Champagne, behind the locked door of his treasure-room, counted over his gold and silver, he was a rueful man; but when he reflected on all the advantages of state he stood to reap from the king's presence he was more than comforted. Louis had indeed dealt strictly with him, during the five days since Vermandois had ridden away with the troubadour. Though the king had not once given utterance to his suspicions concerning Thibault's offense, since Raoul's departure, he had taken care, by hints and scowls, to let his host see that he had not forgotten it.

And now the king had Aquitaine's offer, in black and white, as Vermandois had brought it from Paris—the six thousand gold marks that Aliénor promised in dowry, the five castles she ceded to the Crown, her thrice-welcome consent to the union of all her provinces with the royal demain. She held out on only one point—the lands of Poitou and Aquitaine must be reckoned as part of her dowry; in case of her divorce, or the king's death before her, they should revert to her.

This was a mighty offer. For generations the Crown had vainly striven to wrest from the Dukes of Aquitaine a recognition of the king's suzerainty over them; now Aquitaine itself made the proffer, if the king would marry Aliénor—and the Duchess Aliénor was reputed the most beautiful woman in France.

Thibault could not furnish such a tempting bait. He had already recognized Louis as his liege lord; he could not give up more than two castles. Therefore he must bid all the higher in gold, and it was fortunate for him that France needed gold more than anything else. The Countess Alys was not so fair as her rival, but the king had never seen Aliénor. Thibault had not scrupled to break the seal of the letter he had taken from Cercamon and knew Aquitaine's offer as well as the king, but since Louis also knew it, the count must empty his treasure-chest to tempt the king's fancy to his daughter. This thought tore at his frugal soul, and the close smile on the king's lips maddened him.

But—once the king should sign the marriage contract, Thibault would be the first baron of France. His royal son-in-law would be obliged, by the tie of kindred, to wink at Thibault's ambitions. His enemies would be as dirt under his feet. No longer checked by the envy of the Crown, he could stretch out his greedy hands to seize Burgundy; Flanders, too, should fall before him. Then he and his brother, King Stephen of England, would squeeze Normandy between them as in a vise.

He would be mightier than the king, mightier than Aquitaine.—These his glittering dreams reconciled him to the loss of his gold, which he could recover many times in the loot of neighbor provinces. To secure this boundless advantage he must press Louis to a settlement before Vermandois should bribe or force Cercamon to tell his story, and before the regent could persuade the king to break with Champagne. Aye, all this must be done before morning, for in the morning the king planned to set forth for Paris.

So each of the two antagonists in this game of state played astutely during those five days, while the sweet young countess who was no more to either of them than a pawn was pushed about the broad gaming-board of France with no regard for her shy unhappiness. She knew, now, the rôle destined for her, and took no joy in it; but she had no choice but to obey her father. Well she knew that the players both cared more for gold and broad lands than for her happiness; and she was afraid of the fierce-eyed young king, with his gusts of rage and his cold cunning.

But Louis was well-content. The menace which he held over Thibault's head, in the still unheard testimony of Cercamon, gave him a high advantage in the bargaining. So, too, did the fact that he was in no hurry; while Thibault must win or lose all before Aquitaine learned of his intervention and raised its offer. The two gamesters seemed to change natures; the shrewd old count lost patience and self-control, while the young hot-head became cool, confident and overbearing.

Neither knew that Aquitaine had already heard, thanks to the troubadour's escape; but on the third day a messenger came galloping in on a blown horse to report that Cercamon had fled and could not be found. The King flew into a consuming passion,

vowing death and torture to the fugitive so soon as he should be taken; but he retained enough prudence to hide the disaster from Thibault's ears, and so held his advantage.

Evening of the fifth day found the contract still unsigned, the two cunning adversaries still playing out their game of barter. Thibault had slowly raised his offer of dowry, till it now stood at eighteen thousand marks in gold—an enormous sum, to pay which he must pledge a sixth of his estates. He was trembling with suspense, well-nigh beyond himself at thought of parting with so much wealth.

Louis could scarce contain his satisfaction. Whichever won—Champagne or Aquitaine—he stood to win more by a marriage contract than his great father had been able to win by sword and statesmanship combined. If he allied with Aquitaine, he won half the south; if with Champagne, half the north would be pledged to support him in his impending war with Anjou, and his coffers, now nearly empty, would be crammed with gold.

Thibault drank heavily at supper, and his heart was emboldened by the heady wine. He raised his offer to twenty thousand marks. The young king, smiling sardonically, gestured as if to put the bid aside; but his spirits leaped. He knew Thibault had well-nigh reached his utmost, and the sum was indeed princely. What could he not do with twenty thousand marks? It would buy him many soldiers, professional fighting-men. He could easily overpower Geoffrey of Anjou—why not Brittany also, and even Normandy? Aye, he would seize Normandy from Anjou and hold it for himself.

So intent was Louis on his thoughts that the trumpet which blared without the walls scarce roused him, nor did Thibault regard it either. The prospect of interruption was like the buzzing of a troublesome insect. Thibault raised his shaggy brows inquiringly, and the king nodded. The count gestured to his master of the garrison.

"Admit whoso it may be, Raymond!" he muttered. "But let them not disturb us till I summon you. His Majesty and I must be untroubled."

And, bowing, he led the way to his private chamber.

In preparation for this moment, when the King's defense should weaken, he had laid out on the table in his chamber a sheet of parchment, fairly engrossed by his clerk; his seal was already appended, and tapers and wax were ready for the king's use. He had but to strike the bell that hung by the table, and his clerk would summon his daughter and two knights, to sign the contract as party and witnesses.

It was on this parchment that Louis' eyes fell as soon as he entered the chamber. He sat down on the carven bench before the table and read, for he was as learned as any monk. His long, thin fingers pointed at the words; his lank hair, blown into his face by a draft from an arrow-slit, he shook impatiently back into place.

"The amount of the dowry is not set down," he said, turning his keen eyes on the older man.

Thibault summoned his clerk, a lean fellow in rusty black.

"Write 'twenty thousand marks in gold,' Ambrose!" he said.

Louis glanced at him sardonically.

"Nay," he contradicted. "Write 'twenty-one thousand'!"

But though his lips smiled, his glance was hot, and his heart beat furiously.

The clerk caught his master's eye. Thibault hesitated, licking his dry lips. Then—

"Do as the king bids!" he cried.

The clerk wrote.

Louis caught the pen from his hand, dipped it in the oak-gall and caught the parchment to him. Thibault's hands, gripping the griffon's heads on his chair-arms, were white. The king would sign! All was won!

Louis' fingers poised over the parchment. For an instant he hesitated, then touched the pen to the sheet. At that instant a knock, thundering, impatient, beat on the door.

The king sprang back as if struck, the space for his signature still empty save for a round blot. Thibault was on his feet; but the door was flung violently open, and his master of the garrison came in with staring eyes.

"My lord!" he gasped. 'You must go down to the hall—at once!"

Thibault clutched de Montivre's shoulder fiercely.

"Did I not say that I would not be interrupted?" he snarled.

"Aye, but, gracious lord—they who come——"

"Who is it?" Louis asked; and his tones endured no denial.

"It is—the Duchess of Aquitaine!"

Louis flung himself back in his chair, his mouth twitching in voiceless laughter. Thibault was staggered, white with rage and consternation. How had it happened? Who had brought word of his designs to Aquitaine? How dared the woman come here, to Blois, to his own castle?

But the king, risen, offered the old man his arm, with a courtesy just touched with mockery.

"Let us go down," he said. 'I would fain see this duchess, who is said to be so beautiful. Brave she must be as well as fair, to risk herself here at such a time!"

The king's wish was a command, and Thibault dared not disobey. As he passed through the door, Montivre whispered in his ear—

"Armagnac is with her, with a hundred spears, and—Cercamon!"

THIBAULT of Champagne took fire slowly, but his rage, once kindled, never died. In after years Louis often regretted that soundless laugh at the great baron's discomfiture; but at the moment Thibault stifled his emotions and prepared for the struggle that lay before him.

Twenty-one thousand marks! He had made the highest bid he dared; he had scarce enough left to pay his men-at-arms their wage. He could borrow of the Jews, but they would take his fattest lands in pledge and demand a frightful interest. And now that the Duchess of Aquitaine was here, with that accursed troubadour, Louis would seize the occasion to make her bid against him.

The sordidness of the thing—that a baron of France and a young princess should bargain one against the other for an advantageous marriage—troubled him no more than it would trouble Aliénor. He had never seen Aliénor, but he knew Aquitaine was richer than Champagne. If she was set on marrying Louis, she could offer more than he.

But one thing he knew and calculated on—she was a lady of birth and breeding and must have the grace to refrain from barter against him under his own roof—at least in his presence. If he used all his cunning, all his persuasion, he might yet close his deal with the king before Louis departed. And to that end he must keep Louis with him after Aliénor could be induced to leave.

Therefore he accepted the situation with what poise he could. The two princes entered the hall together, Louis assured and smiling, Thibault outwardly calm, but on fire within, But Aliénor was not there.

Surrounded by a crowd of knights—they of France, who had come in the king's suite, rubbing shoulders affably with Thibault's vassals and a knot of new-come lords from Aquitaine—stood Bertrand of Armagnac; and at his side was Cercamon. Armagnac was talking briskly, and the company listened breathlessly. Thibault's ears caught a few words here and there—vivid phrases of battle, to which the soldiers of France ever listen avidly. And Armagnac was a soldier whom every glory-loving soldier worshiped, whose skill to paint a mêlée was as great as his sword was trenchant.

At the threshold Thibault stepped back one pace, to give precedence to the king. It was Armagnac who first saw the young monarch's tall form and signed to the crowd about him to fall back. All bowed, and Bertrand stepped forward to kiss the king's hand. But Louis' eyes traveled past him to the troubadour, and anger sparkled in them.

"That man is yours, Bertrand," he said, his finger pointing out Cercamon. "Five days hence I sent him to Paris, under escort. He escaped, ignoring my orders. I pray you give him to me, that I may deal with him!"

Armagnac glanced over his shoulder at Cercamon.

"He was on my service, your Majesty," he replied. "I take his guilt on my shoulders."

Louis bit his lips. There was nothing he could say or do. Cercamon was vassal to Bertrand, Bertrand to Aliénor; and Aliénor of Aquitaine was a sovereign princess, who owed no vassalage to France. But in that moment Thibault tasted a shred of triumph: Armagnac's defiance of the king's will was a bad way to introduce Aquitaine's suit for a marriage with the king. Thibault almost forgave the troubadour for that tiny, precious advantage. And while he chewed that crumb of consolation, Armagnac, who was no courtier, made matters worse by turning from Louis and greeting his unwilling host.

"Your Grace will pardon the duchess that she has not waited your coming," Bertrand said. "She has gone to Countess Alys' apartments to rest from the fatigues of her journey."

But in that moment the voice of an usher rang from the door—

"Her Grace the Duchess of Aquitaine, Countess of Poitou and Suzeraine of Auvergne!"

Every voice was hushed, every eye lifted to the doorway. The king faced about, his eyes lighting with curiosity; Thibault stood stiff, gnawing his lip. The assembled knights fell apart to left and right, those of Aquitaine falling to one knee. Aliénor entered, on the arm of Alys; and at sight of her Thibault's heart sank.

Not for nothing had rumor heralded her the loveliest woman in France. She was tall and exquisitely graceful; not a dark beauty of that Roman kind for which the South is famous, but all gold and roses, with the perfect features which had been bred in her ancestry for three generations.

But more than mere perfection of line and color was the spirit within, that flooded all her being with a resplendent vitality. She seemed a princess of romance, descended from the gods of pagan story.

Yet there was not too much of the goddess in her to disdain human prudence, for she was clad not in the dusty robes of her journey, but in a fresh, close-fitting bodice of pale-blue silk, and a flowing gown of the same color, broidered in gold by the cunning Moors of Andalusia. Her fine arms were bare from the elbow, her wondrous golden hair was a crown upon her head. She wore no jewels, nor needed any.

Louis was nearest her, and first saw her full splendor. He uttered a soft gasp, and in the complete silence the sound was heard to the farthest corner of the room. He bent to kiss her hand, then, retaining her fingers, led her to Thibault. The count's reluctant back bent in as gracious a bow as he could manage. Though Aliénor caught the glint of anger in his eyes, her expression never altered from that meek graciousness which made her seem an angel from heaven.

And almost as such the knights of France regarded her in that moment. Adoration of beauty was in their blood; the worship of lovely women, born in the south, had already found its shrines in Paris. Never before had those soldiers seen such loveliness; never again would they see it in any other woman. Emulating her own vassals, they sank to their knees before her. Even Thibault's more stolid easterners felt her spell.

The old Count of Champagne was seized with panic. Beside this woman any other was as nothing; not a man in that hall had eyes for his daughter, hostess though she was in her father's house. She stood unseen, unregarded, her own eyes turned in rapturous admiration on Aliénor. Oh, that his master of the garrison had had the wit, the daring, to keep his drawbridge raised and his gates closed to these accursed folk of the south!

Yet Thibault knew in his heart that even he would not have dared to shut Aliénor out from his castle and bid defiance to a sovereign princess, while the King of France, with three hundred of his bravest knights, was within its walls.

IT WAS Bertrand of Armagnac who broke the tension. Striding past the king, he bowed one knee before the Countess Alys and raised her fingers to his lips. Her words of welcome lifted the spell. A huge chair, padded with the skins of beasts and silken cushions, was placed near the hearth for Aliénor; the king sat on her right, Thibault on her left and Alys behind her chair. The knights gathered round; the magic of Armagnac's martial tales vied with that of the duchess' beauty. So they sat till the tables were spread.

Aliénor knew when to be indiscreet and how to take the sting from indiscretion with her smiles. Over the wine she gave her loveliest glance to Thibault and laid her left hand on his arm.

"I have a quarrel to pick with you, my lord count!" she began. "It was ill done of you to seize my messenger!"

Thibault caught his breath and glanced at the king. The charge brought against him by Vermandois was proved now; surely all was lost! Louis was already under her spell; this would rouse him to fury. But Louis only shrugged his shoulders and returned Thibault's gaze sardonically. Thibault felt baffled and afraid; therefore he was silent.

"Fortunately that messenger was Cercamon," the duchess's flute-like voice resumed. "He found others to take his letter to Paris and to warn me. I rode

north at once, thinking to lay my complaint before the regent in Paris; and so I should have done, had Cercamon not met us."

Cercamon! This was the first Thibault had heard of the troubadour's escape from Vermandois. Once more the count glanced at Louis, who laughed shortly.

"Aye!" the king exclaimed, with a hard look at Cercamon, who sat on Armagnac's left. "I would have had the truth from him, and then taken him into my service; but he was too slippery to hold. Will you make me such a song as never before was heard, troubadour, if I forgive you?"

Cercamon rose and bowed.

"Perchance," he said, "but it will take time to make such a song. And in the mean time I may forfeit the pardon."

Thibault felt as if the solid earth had opened under his feet, to plunge him into some topsy-turvy land of faerie. This woman had spoken out such truths as should blast his good repute and make every man of birth in France look askance at him—yet none of all that company seemed to sense their meaning. The king, who had every right to be furious with him for intercepting a messenger to the Court, merely shrugged and smiled. Cercamon, fresh from an escapade that had roused all the king's anger, even now was scarce civil in responding to an offer of pardon. That woman from the south had so bewitched them all that they neither saw nor heard but as she wished; and for the moment she seemed not to wish for discord.

But there were others who glanced at her with uneasy eyes, for they knew her—Armagnac and the troubadour. They had seen her in her own court, in all her rainbow moods; and they felt how heavy with peril the atmostphere had become. Cercamon, more than the old soldier his master, felt the tension. With all his poet's sensitiveness he responded to the undertones of Aliénor's voice, her quick, graceful gestures, the subtle note of pride and mischief that rose in her tones as she drank more wine.

Cercamon knew that beneath her lustrous beauty there dwelt a hidden demon, that fed on ambition, on greed, on lust of possessing and of using power. He watched her eyes, noting how they roved now and again, in little, catlike flashes, toward Thibault's daughter. The demon was stirring in Aliénor, laughing as she played with Thibault's fears, but able at any moment to leap into tempestuous, devastating life.

His eyes left her and sought the gentle, ingenuous girl on the king's left. Countess Alys would never kindle the tongues of singers to rapturous praise; she would not set princes to quarreling over her beauty. But she would bless with quiet happiness and with wise, honest counsel, the man who should know how to cherish her.

Thibault regained his tongue at last.

"You are very gracious," he muttered. "I shall remember your kindness."

In all honesty—for the disaster which he saw overwhelming his schemes had subdued both his cunning and his spirit for the moment—the old man was seeking to bury the memory of his offense; but Aliénor chose to misinterpret those ambiguous words, "I shall remember your kindness." Her eyes flashed, and into her too-sweet voice there crept an undertone of sheer malice that made Cercamon, listening, feel sick at heart.

"Cercamon met us beyond Tours," she said. "He and Armagnac advised me to ride straight on to Paris and demand of the regent that he summon you to a royal council, at which the king would have been compelled to be present also; and the charge would have been raised against you so that you could not have evaded it. But I thought otherwise. It is Louis who is king in France, not the regent; and I determined to place my case in the king's own hands. Therefore I ordered that we ride hither. I have you to thank for the thought, my lord of Champagne. Did not you choose to lay your suit before the king, rather than the regent?"

Her words were softly uttered, but they stung. Thibault recognized, as she meant him to, that his very cleverness in trapping Cercamon had been twisted against him by the troubadour's intelligence. Cercamon's message, sent just before his capture, had brought Vermandois from Paris, to give the king the means to extort a high offer and to furnish Cercamon a chance to escape and freedom from his parole.

Cercamon's report to the duchess concerning Thibault's direct suit to the king had inspired Aliénor to bring her offer, her accusation and her fatal beauty to Blois.

And Thibault glared at Cercamon with a concentrated fury, the threat of which he could not veil before the king had seen it.

But Louis only laughed—a laugh which Thibault liked none the better because he could not understand it. He felt that Louis practised on him and had some trick in store; and no man likes less to be tricked than he who has himself intrigued.

BUT Aliénor had more in store for him, and worse. So far, what she had said had at least been so veiled that his daughter, who knew nothing of his dealings with Cercamon, did not understand what was at stake. Alys knew that her father had offered her hand to the king, but not that Aliénor was her rival; nor did she suspect it. But Thibault understood the covert thrust in the duchess' words, and he was still reddening at it when she dealt an open stab that revealed how concious she was of her advantage.

"I was sure," she said—and her bewitching eyes sought Louis, who gazed into them with open admiration—"I was sure I could trust his Majesty's good taste."

Unable to endure the torture longer, Thibault rose, trembling with rage. Once more he glared at Cercamon, the instrument that had made his humiliation possible. But it was a bitterly unhappy face that the troubadour turned toward him. Cercamon had few illusions about his duchess, but he had never before seen the soul of Jezebel so revoltingly plain behind her beauty.

And now Alys herself began to understand. The poor girl was aflame with affronted pride. The tension which held those in the secret spread through the company; though most of the knights knew only part of the negotiations on one side or the other, Aliénor's jeering words gave them material to guess the rest.

All were silent, scowling, or casting uneasy glances at one another. Champenois glowered at Aquitanian, while the Parisians strove to conceal an embarrassment which, for them, was unrelieved by the satisfaction of ancient hatreds.

Thibault, on his feet, bowed low to the king, stiffly to Aliénor. His pride, cut to the raw, was stronger now than greed or ambition. With an access of superb dignity, he confronted young Louis as he might have faced a haggling merchant.

"Your Majesty has received my last offer," he began. "All too much have I chaffered over that which is above price. Your Majesty must choose as may seem best for the honor of France."

Offering his arm to his daughter, he turned to leave the hall. At this, the whole company rose; but Louis flung out an arm to command attention. His prudence was flung to the winds; from the first moment of Aliénor's queenly entrance, her beauty had set his brain on fire. He had drunk more than his wont and was not his own master.

"Then hear!" he cried so that all turned in astonishment at the passion in his voice. He seized Aliénor's hand, drew her to him, and raised his wine-cup. "Then hear, Thibault, and all ye men of France! I have chosen, and now I offer you a health to Aliénor of Aquitaine, the fairest woman in the world, and soon to be queen of France!"

To Cercamon, watching with pitiful eyes, the astounded knights seemed to fade away from his vision, leaving nothing but the dark background of the walls, the glare of the torches, and between those two, standing out with terrible distinctness, the triumphant, jeering Aliénor and the humbled Countess Alys.

Why should not Louis choose Aliénor, loveliest of women even in her most evil moods, so lovely that her bodily perfection veiled the ugliness of her heart? What was a dowry of more than twenty thousand marks of finest gold beside a beauty which the world could not buy again with all its wealth, if she were no more?

No wonder the boy who bore the crown of France had no eyes for the girl who clung to Thibault's arm, red and white by turns, brutally humiliated, pointed at by Aliénor's scorn. A great pity for Alys welled in the troubadour's heart, and a fierce rage against Aliénor, whom he had served faithfully, but who was unworthy an honest man's regard.

He stood still beside his chair, his hand trembling on its carven back. Then, for an instant, the Countess Alys met his gaze and seemed to draw strength from it. Her firm chin went up, her eyes blazed; she faced Aliénor with a pride that dominated the other woman's triumph.

"I congratulate the Duchess of Aquitaine," she said in low, clear tones. "France could have no fairer queen!"

Cercamon thrilled with response to her pride, that would not let her return scorn for scorn. But his anger was greater than

before, that the king could be so blind, and Aliénor so cruel.

At the countess' words, the men of Aquitaine burst into applause; but they of Champagne muttered in their beards. The knights of the king's suite, as in duty bound, cheered loudly. As the tumult died down, one who had drunk more than was good spoke his mind, and his words pierced through the subsiding murmur with terrible clearness:

"The king has chosen well! She of Aquitaine is worth a thousand of the other!"

The silence that followed was quick with menace. Thibault of Champagne swung about as if he had been struck; his knights reached for their hilts. The Aquitanians, seeing the hostile glances and gestures, grouped about Bertrand of Armagnac as if to form battle-array. Then Cercamon's endurance broke. His whole soul was outraged at the insult; his fiery love of combat and his sensitive honor forced from his lips a reply that he scarce realized before it crossed his lips. But it rang through the hall like a peal of trumpets:

"Nay, the king has chosen like a fool! He has scorned the pure gold, and has chosen the gilded lead!"

He caught one glimpse of Thibault's astounded face before the tempest burst about him. Then, with hot cries of rage, the king's knights flung themselves upon him, their swords flashing from the scabbard. The Aquitanians would have been first in avenging the slight to their duchess, had they not known Cercamon better. For a year he had been among them, and they knew his terrible skill with his weapon. Only a moment they hesitated, but that moment sufficed. Bertrand d'Armagnac, who had led them a hundred times in the storm of battle, cast himself between them and the troubadour.

"Back!" he cried. "The first man of the south to draw sword against Cercamon dies by my blade! My lady duchess, your grace can afford to ignore such words from one who has served you well in the past, and who now is mad! Bethink you well what a crime it is to slay a troubadour!"

His last words had an effect which nothing else could have wrought. The Aquitanians indeed knew the shame and peril of drawing weapon on one of Cercamon's profession. He whose point drew Cercamon's blood would never again be safe south of Garonne, though he surrounded himself with armed men every moment of his life.

In single combat, in the cleared lists, or on the field of battle one might kill a troubadour without scruple, for that is fair fight; but to massacre a singer— One prince had done that, long ago; and nobles and kings had vied for the honor of slaying him.

But the Parisians pressed on. Not yet had the north learned the singer's sanctity; and even priests have died for angering kings. Cercamon, standing at the table's end, had its poor shelter for so long as his point might keep their weight at bay. He stood poised on the balls of his feet, his point raised, waiting.

But those about him were not all king's men; Thibault's vassals also were there. At a gesture from their lord they flung themselves in front of the troubadour. They came between him and the hungry French steel barely in time; already swords gleamed in the torchlight, and here and there the blades of Paris clashed with those of Blois.

"Call off your cutthroats, my lord!" cried Thibault to the king. "Dares even the King of France do murder in my house?"

Louis, pale with fury, was forced to call his men back. They withdrew reluctant, quivering with unleashed anger. But the outraged monarch was not ready to forego his vengeance for the slight to his chosen queen. Nor would she let him forget; she stood beside him, plucking at his velvet sleeve; and her beautiful features were twisted with fury.

"Kill him!" she whispered, and Louis, nodding, turned to Thibault.

"You hear?" he cried. "This pot-minstrel is the duchess' man, and she demands his death. He has affronted your king within your walls. Will you stand between him and his just punishment? By my father's soul, Thibault! If you protect him, you answer for it to me! Give me his life!"

Cercamon stood waiting with unsheathed sword, his eyes on Thibault. The old count measured his royal master with a gaze like a roused lion's. At last he spoke, slowly, his words loud and full of majesty:

"When you, my lord, insulted me over my own board; when this woman you have chosen to reign over us heaped her scorn on me and mine, did I demand your life or hers? Of all who have broken bread with me this day, only one dared speak in my

defense—and he was my enemy, by whose wit alone the Duchess of Aquitaine has won her triumph. He, whom I would have slain had I had the chance, has risked his life to say that which I, your host, was bound not to say—but which was in my heart. You shall not have his life, nor shall any man lay hand on him within my territories!"

Turning his back on the fuming monarch, Thibault of Champagne strode to Cercamon and took his hand. Then, calling his master of the garrison, he issued his orders so that they were heard by all:

"Double the guard at the gate, and let no man of the king's, or of Aquitaine, issue forth for three hours! Bid a groom bring Cercamon's horse and grant him free passage. Make haste!"

Cercamon glanced at Bertrand d'Armagnac, the master and friend whose favor at court and comradeship in the field had been so dear to him; and Armagnac nodded in approval of Thibault's words. But Armagnac said nothing, for he knew that the demon roused in Aliénor's breast would never be assuaged with less than the troubadour's death.

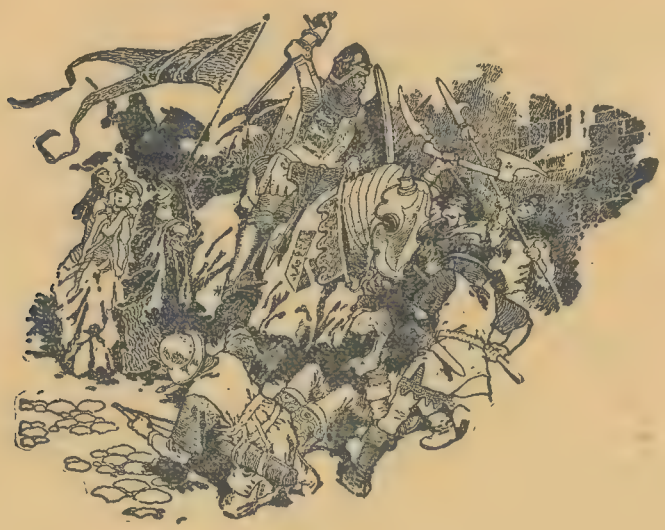
Then Cercamon glanced at the king and saw him gnawing his fingers in helpless anger. Sheathing his sword, the troubadour strode between the ranks of men that fell back to give him passage, the Champenois grinning at him, the rest glaring their hate. At the door he paused, and swept a low bow to the Countess Alys.

His horse was waiting at the drawbridge. The great gate was thronged with mailed men-at-arms, and as he passed between them, their friendly glances told him they had heard the news. Montivre, the master of the garrison and a man of noble birth, ran forward to hold the stirrup. But Cercamon put him gently aside, and shook his hand.

"Now ride as if fiends were after you!" Montivre urged. "There will be no pursuit for three hours, that I promise you! The king dares not make war on my master, lest France shatter in his grasp!"

Masterless, with half of France thirsting for his blood, Cercamon rode. Nor was he afraid, but rather glad, with the lure of new lands and new adventures calling him. Night, and three hours' grace—enough to bring him safely into Burgundy. Then south—far south, to Barcelona—that last, far-flung island of French life on Spanish soil. There he would find new glory and carve out a new career.

He tossed his black locks back over his shoulders, and burst into song.



WHITE-MAN STUFF

A Complete Novelette by BARRY SCOBEE

Author of "Even Up," "Seven Fools," etc.

BIG LARKIN and little "Fizzle" hung over a hitch-rack in Alamos, out of the range of machine-gun bullets, and scoffed at the American cavalry garrison on the Texas side of the Rio Grande, and scoffed in particular at one lieutenant.

The amused and cautious Mexican population around the American garrison—observing Larkin's swagger, his bulging muscles, and hearing his bellow—had done a characteristic thing. It had nicknamed him el Toro—the Bull.

"To —— with him," rumbled el Toro contemptuously, meaning the lieutenant. "White-man stuff! Huh! Says this Goggle-Eyes to me, says he, lispin' like a girl, 'Don't you know they's a white-man code o' ideals?' "

"An' you says—?" queried the little man eagerly.

"Says I, on the prod, 'The white man's code o' ideals is women and loot and lots o' hooch!' "

El Toro, the Bull, chuckled his contempt and slapped grats on his great, naked, brown arms. Fizzle cackled in sheer ecstasy at this flaunting of an officer.

"Goggle-Eyes is plumb nuts about white-man stuff," he allowed.

"They collect some foreign aliens," el Toro went on, "and put me with 'em to incalculate the principles of Americanism into us. Me! And me been in the Army two months. And some o' them Dutchmans thought they was more American than I was.

"Says this Goggle-Eyes, says he to us, 'Ever since this mighty white-skinned race, our forefathers, set out on this trip down the centuries to conquer new lands—'or something like that, says he—'with a long-haired woman foller'n' behind, and him dressed with nothing but a tigerskin over his shoulder——'

" 'My granddad come from Kentuck to Missouri,' I says, 'and he didn't come in no such garb.'

"I was on the prod anyhow, bein' bunched with them foreign aliens and herded by that pink lieut. Goggle-Eyes says on.

"Says he, 'The English-speakin' people have built their nations on religious freedom, and high regard for women, and justice, and trial by jury, and honesty, mercy, courage, chastity'—whatever'n —— that is—'and loyalty to the highest principles,' says he. 'That's white-man stuff,' says he. 'It's a-cropping out on a man, like his whiskers, whether he knows it or not.'

" 'You've left out something,' says I, and I don't know whether to smash him or tickle him under the chin with a chicken feather. 'I've teamed on all the gradin'-crews the Santa Fé ever had, an' I never

see any stuff like that,' says I. 'It ain't what we called white-man stuff.'

"He regards me hard, suspicious all at once.

" 'What you chawing?' says he.

" 'Tobacker,' says I, and I let a squirt o' juice fly so's to make one o' them Dutchman's jerk back his foot to save it from a calcimining.

"I might as well have spit that layout into the pink lieutenant's face. He points a pink finger at me—

" 'Throw that right straight out,' says he to me. 'Cleanse your mouth.'

"Well, I done so.

" 'Here,' says he, 'if you got to chaw, chaw this stick o' gum.'

"You can believe it or not, that Goggle-Eyes defames the white man like that for three days; he sho' does, tellin' how high-class principles are always cropping out; and I begin to simmer and sizzle inside. I begin to egg myself on to show 'em where to head in."

"Me," broke in Fizzle, "I showed 'em where to head in."

"Like the blinkin' —— you did!" roared the disputatious el Toro. "You desert your post in the face o' the enemy. You get six years for being a coward, and you take it layin' down. Don't tell me!"

"Enemy!" sputtered Fizzle. "They was Mexes swimming their beasts across the river to raid a ranch. Night, it was. I only went for help."

"Haw-haw-haw!" jeered the huge-muscled hulk. "And I busted the guard-house down for you. Don't talk to me."

Fizzle sulked. El Toro chuckled and mumbled, and shook his head and slapped at gnats, and squirted tobacco-juice into the dust there by the hitch-rack and the door of the low stone structure that was military headquarters.

"White-man stuff! Loot—hooch!"

Bullets cracked and *pinged* overhead continually, for the Mexicans inside of Alamos were besieged by Mexicans under Ocho the Butcher on the outside, and this was a good-night hashup of lead.

From the barracks in Mariposa, Fizzle and el Toro, and any of the American garrison that was interested enough to turn their eyes, had been able to see this mud-dauber town of Alamos on the top of its dun bare hill. There had seemed to be not more than a dozen, but here within there were at least thirty scattered adobe houses and mere shacks.

Now, from the hitch-rack, with their positions reversed, the two could look across the isinglass river and down upon Mariposa. The cottonwood-trees glinted greenly, and the whitewashed barracks shone pinkly in the last of the day's sun.

The Stars and Stripes, still blowing from the summit of the slender white staff, waved a good night to them. But it did not touch el Toro's heart. To him, if he thought about it, the flag was only the emblem of a nose-glassed lieutenant who lisped and said sweet things that made a man's blood boil.

'White-man stuff!"

Larkin's contempt broke again into chuckles.

"'Women and loot and a keg o' hooch,' " says I, to make him shiver.

"Says the lieut to me so nice, says he, 'Private Larkin,' says he, 'can you tell the class what the Anglo-Saxons is?'

" 'Automobiles,' says I.

"Him and one o' them foreign aliens laugh. I don't know till yet what about. And I get madder.

"Next day, which was yesterday, I go up to the hall and all them aliens is there. They's seven. They's only seven chairs. Don't nobody get up to say to me, 'Set down here, Mr. Larkin.' Thinks I, 'Here's a chance to learn 'em some real white-man stuff,' the lieut not being there to interfere.

"I take one o' them by the collar and set him off on to the floor, and I take the chair. The fight starts. When it is over the hall is chokin' with dust, three good chairs is busted, two of the foreign aliens is outside on the ground, and the rest are running every which way. Up come Goggle-Eyes on the run.

" 'What this mean?' he yells. 'What you in rags for?'

" 'They got my nanny,' says I.

" 'Shame on you, shame on you,' he says, wigglin' a finger at my face.

"It goaded me, that finger did. I begin to rub my hand on the side of my pants to get it hot to slap him with.

" 'This ain't proper conduct,' says he, 'toward a alien race we're tryin' to make into Anglo-Saxons.'

"'Ain't it?' says I, rubbing my pa'm harder.

" 'No, it ain't,' he says. 'It ain't the right deeds croppin' out.'

"'Bunk!' says I, and the flat o' my hand was all but smoking, I was so ready.

"'What's that?' says he. 'Don't you know they's a white man's code of ideals?' says he. 'Ain't you never learnt that yet?'

"'The white man code o' ideals,' says I, to make him shiver, 'is women, and loot, and a lot o'hooch.'

"'You're talking bad luck,' says he, sharp as a blinkin' razor.

"'Bad for who?' says I, and at that I come up with my hot hand on his jaw.

"It tilts his specs and spins him around two-three times, fast.

"'Hoo-woo-pee!' I yell, and jump up and kick my heels together three times coming down.

"He go to leggin' it out of there double time.

"'You'll get ten years for this,' he yell back over his brass shoulder-bar.

"I begin to run after him, beller'n' like a bull.

"'Have courage,' I yell, 'and mercy, and chastity, and loyalty to the automobiles!'

"'Ten years for you in a desolate prison,' he howl, and begin to head for the guard-house and yowl:

"'Turn out the guard! Turn out the guard!'

"'That's your white-man stuff!' I yell at him.

"I hear a feller runnin' and puffin' behind me. He is one o' them Dutchmans—a feller they call a Roman or Romanian or something else from New York. And another feller that's holler'n' something.

"The guard turn out, all in a rush with guns.

"'Lassoo 'im!' yells the lieut.

"I slow down. No sense running into the whole guard. And then the next I know I come to in that there crib with you."

"The sergeant said a bird biffed you with a rock on the back of your head."

"Yeah—that Roman, I bet. That was the reason I could jab a hole through that 'dobe guard-house. I was on the prod."

A horse, apparently stretched out lifeless beyond the hitch-rack and the shelter of the wide-spread stone structure, where bullets whirred at times, stirred and tried to raise its head.

"Shot this morning," said Fizzle excitedly. "Ain't croaked yet."

El Toro gurgled and mumbled over his contempt and his fun.

"Women, and loot," he summed up finally, "and a barrel o' hooch. That's all the white-man principle that ever crops out, Fizzle, and don't you forget it."

And then he swiped out the big automatic pistol the Mexicans had given to him and shot the horse, cleanly, effectively.

"Put it out of its misery," he said simply.

A MEXICAN strode around the corner of the headquarters structure before which they stood. He smiled with evident intent to be all friendliness. He wore nose-glasses and looked like a school-teacher. And he wore a high sombrero, khaki shirt and khaki trousers on which were blood and dirt and chicken-feathers, so that he resembled a kitchen helper.

"Ah, Señor Larkin," said he with expanding politeness, "I find you here patiently. And Señor—ah—Fizzle. Perhaps Ocho the Butcher will let us rest now, yes?"

"Looks like he's knocking off for the day," El Toro answered agreeably.

"Then I may now show you where the corral is—not," he added hastily, "that we shall find necessity of making use of the horses within. You understand?"

"Sur-r-r-e," declared the Bull. "Ocho *might* get in, and you'll show Fizzle and me where the horses is so we won't be left behind when the rest of you skedaddle."

"Uhmmm—" demurred the Mexican.

"Well," went on the big American, "it's a good thing to have on a pair of pants in case company comes. We'll see where the horses is, but tomorrow—eh? *Mañana*—we'll go and eat Ocho."

"Ah, *señor*, you are so bold!"

"Aw, quit your blinkin' sloppin'."

A young Mexican came up—Roberto, who had been a watchful shadow, and brotherly guide, of the two Americans all day.

He saluted the be-glassed and be-feathered one—

"My general," said he, "Ocho the Terrible is withdrawing for the night."

"Supper-time," said el Toro, a world of hint in his words, for he had not eaten since early in the day.

And he put it up straight to the general.

"Eh, Garza, what do you think?"

"We shall dine presently," replied the general. "I desire to show you the other side of the town."

They started toward the down-river side of the village and the hill, el Toro and the self-styled patriot general—of an army of fifteen or twenty men—leading the way. The thirty or so houses of Alamos were of sun-baked brick except the centrally located headquarters, which was of a fossiliferous stone, and the largest building on the hill.

The Bull fully felt the importance of a general's friendship. He felt his oats also. And he strode along remarking and laughing. His height and bulk, his wide-swung arms and Garza's ticklish watchfulness—all were reminiscent of a small boy leading a skittish Percheron stud to water.

"Some little scrap today," observed Larkin conversationally.

"And you did nobly," complimented the general. "Ah, nobly!"

"Quit your kiddin'!"

El Toro thumbed the general's ribs.

"You may have observed," said the Mexican, "that our enemy does his fighting entirely from the up-river side of town."

"I getcha, bo. If Ocho shot into this fine little town from the land side, or the down-river side, his bullets that went high would light over in the United States, around Mariposa, against the President's orders. Them white men over there—" he jerked out a great-muscled arm toward the American garrison—"would clean up on both o' you blinkin' outfits over here, hey?"

"The Americans," conceded Garza coldly, "have warned various factions to be careful where their bullets fall."

And he added under his breath contemptuously—

"White men."

"You bet a blinkin' eye," agreed el Toro. "Ocho the Butcher knows good and well where to let his bullets drop—off over there in the interior of Mexico."

Garza turned his face away and cleared his throat. It may have been that he was quelling resentment. For he spoke presently in a conversational tone:

"The Americans' warning is quite an asset to us. It keeps Ocho fighting from one side of the town—lets us get all our men on the one front. See?"

He pointed.

"In the last adobe *casa?*" he went on. "A wounded man is stationed there to watch on the east and south lest Ocho try to surprize us. It is that, for one thing, I wished to show you so that you may not fear an attack from the back when fighting in the trench as you did today."

"Fear?"

El Toro was minded to take the little Mexican by the collar.

General Garza changed the subject quickly.

"I must offer you and Señor—er —Fizzle my special thanks for your assistance with the machine guns today. I will say I never saw such work as yours."

"Don't mention it, ol' top," el Toro deprecated modestly. "I—I ain't much of a shot. Outa practise."

From his left hip pocket he drew out a neatly pressed fur and shook it out until they saw it was a gray cat pelt. El Toro was inordinately proud of this, it was such a pat testimony of his marksmanship.

The first time that Larkin, after he enlisted with the American cavalry regiment, went out to the target range for drill with machine guns he got hold of a gun in a nest and turned it on the catskin nailed to a cottonwood tree at a Mexican shack. The Mexican set up a howl that his property was damaged, and Larkin's troop commander ordered the soldier to pay the bean farmer two bits for the ruined skin.

When count was made of the bullet-holes in it there were found to be forty-nine, and there could not have been more than fifty cartridges in the drum of the Lewis gun. The same officer offered Larkin one dollar for the skin, and Larkin turned him down cold. After that the big fellow kept it closer by him than he ever pretended to keep a handkerchief.

Garza took the skin and looked at it.

"Whew!" he whistled.

Roberto examined it too, then got back and circled around el Toro once as if the big fellow were an elephant at a circus.

At the corral, which was of a dozen strands of barbed wire, even to the gate, they paused to look.

"About thirty-five animals there, ain't they?" said Fizzle, taking a decided interest in things all at once.

"Forty," said Roberto.

It was growing dusk, so that the horses back in the herd could not be seen well. Of the same mind, el Toro and Fizzle crawled between the wires and went among the drooping mounts. Fizzle began to

grumble to himself, and in a moment he exploded:

"——! What lookin' beasts! They're starved!"

"Starved!" bellowed Larkin. "They's starved a week ago."

He turned on Garza.

"Why'n —— don't you feed yo' stock?"

The general shrugged and threw out his hands.

"Why?" he asked. "They'll still carry a few men in case we have to bid Ocho *adios*."

"You wouldn't ride 'em?" blurted Fizzle. "Them twists o' skin and bones?"

Garza and Roberto shrugged.

"Torture 'em?" wailed Fizzle.

He began to stroke and pet a horse nuzzling at his elbow.

"Hey, wouldja?" demanded el Toro.

"You 'white men,' said Garza with drawling emphasis, "have a racial characteristic that is always cropping out. I have observed it in six years of campaigning with specimens of you. You regard animals as if they were as deserving of kindness as humans."

"Ain't they?" snarled little Fizzle meaningly; and el Toro walked up to the other side of the fence before Garza, meaningly also.

"Oh, surely," smiled the general. "Surely."

"You bet your blinkin' hide," went on Larkin. "I've drove horses and mules on half o' the Santa Fé grading-camps, and they ain't one is going to give me the horse laugh 'over there' because o' dirt I done him here."

"Shall we go up to supper?" the general suggested.

Fizzle and el Toro looked at each other. Garza moved off a few paces, and Roberto followed.

"We'll look 'em over better," said Fizzle.

"And we don't need no guide," added Larkin.

The two Mexicans started off up the slope. The Americans entered the corral and went among the animals, serious, curious and amazed at what the Mexicans were doing out of sheer carelessness. Fleabitten, gaunt, sore-backed, they were animals which the humane society in any American town would have ordered shot.

"Crool, crool as the work of a drunken step-daddy," half-sobbed Fizzle.

"I'll bet they ain't even had a swig o' water today, or even yeste'day maybe," surmised Larkin.

"Let's turn 'em out!" hissed Fizzle. "Danged aliens."

"*Zzzzt!*" warned el Toro.

He shot his hard gaze through the gathering darkness.

"That Roberto is squattin' by a runt mesquite up the slope there. If they'd catch us doin' it they'd shoot us for traitors."

"Tonight maybe, Larkin?"

"You betcha, kid—if we hafta do it over the carcass o' this whole Mexican army of twenty men. Ain't no sense treating animals like that."

They bent and shoved their bodies and lifted their legs through the wires, and started up the slope. The chunk of shadow moved too.

"Spying," whispered el Toro. "We gotta talk loud or they'll think we're plotting."

He began to whistle a tuneless see-sawing racket and to stride along. Little Fizzle had to trot to keep up.

"Fizzle," the big man broke off, "if you wasn't a coward——"

"Dang it! I ain't!" Fizzle flashed back fiercely.

"Naw! Why'd the soldiers over there nickname you Fizzle for then, hey? Because you fizzled out. Savvy? No good—N. G."

"Dang it, you don't know me, you don't," whined the little man.

"If you wasn't," went on el Toro, "you and me'd pull some—" he chuckled—"white-man stuff in this town. You and me, we'd get us some women and loot and a jug o' hooch, hey?"

"You're joking, Larkin? No women for me in the town anyhow."

"Maybe. Maybe. A nigger can hear a pecan drop a mile off. I can hear a woman giggle, kid, when she giggles in her thoughts, and I caught a female giggle on the fly when we was standin' in front o' headquarters a while ago cussin' Goggle-Eyes."

"You're fierce," countered Fizzle, his meaning obscure.

El Toro, chuckling his great spilling, chesty chuckle:

"Women! *And* hooch, *and* loot!"

"An' vi'lence!"

The Bull reared his body upon his toes,

and filled his lungs, and yelled in sheer ecstasy, or cussedness, a steamboat siren of a yell that must have sent chills through Ocho's sentries, and that did send Roberto scampering on ahead among the loose rocks—

"*Hoo-woo-pay!*"

ROBERTO, whom el Toro had dubbed Bobby, spoke a good brand of El Paso poolroom English when there was no occasion for a flowery variety. He sat in the darkness, on the flat stone doorstep before the thick-walled stone headquarters, when el Toro and Fizzle arrived. As they reached the hitch-rack, a dozen steps away, he called out—

"The general says for you birds to go in to hash."

"I could eat a whole Harvey House," allowed el Toro.

The Americans followed into the place. In this, their first day in Alamos, they had not entered the building before. At the one meal of the day, so far, they had eaten from a pot carried by a soldier to the trench that rimmed the mesa's edge on the west.

They passed through a room bare save for a broken machine gun and a table with a scattered pack of cards, and two or three wooden chairs. These things they saw by the dim light of a guttering nub of a candle in the ring of a bayonet stuck in the floor. It was there to light any comers on to the door that Roberto now opened and waved them through.

They found themselves on the flagstoned floor of a big patio, or hollow square without roof. They stared with shrewd eyes.

A long table was littered, and Garza and several men mostly bandaged, sat around it eating. The place was lighted by a half-dozen candles stuck in bayonets thrust between the stones of the floor or the walls. In the middle of the patio were women. They were around a fire. Two young women sat on a blanket rolling bandages.

This was el Toro's mental collection at the first glance around. Now he analyzed. The bandaged men at the table—they were still in the fight; but four or five on cots appeard to be out of it. A thin, brown woman waited on the table, ladling something from a common hand-basin into the men's plates.

The women! El Toro's eyes began to glisten. Leathery women worked about the fire, where a huge iron pot hung over the blaze. Two old women patted out the thin corncakes he had learned were *tortillas*, and were pronounced "torteeyas," and baked them on thin sheets of iron over tiny charcoal fires between the flagstones.

As to the two young women, he saw that one was a dainty little thing that made him think of glass—"handle with care." The other was a strapping beauty that looked as if she might be of a kind that a Ranger had told him were Indian Mexicans from the west coast of Mexico. He stared at them, and they stared back at him, hardly seeing Fizzle at all.

"Women!" murmured Larkin, smacking a huge fist softly into a great palm. Then he rumbled: "By cracky, Fiz, here's the women! Now for the hooch."

Grinning, he strode toward the girls. Everybody had been watching the two strangers in the moment of their pause to look over their surroundings. Now, as Larkin stepped forward, a sort of fixed, tense grin and stare held them enthralled.

The girls sprang up in alarm and ran back among the older women; and the women, seven in all, seized the long blue bayonets from post and ground, and, spreading their skirts like so many ruffing hens, hissed strange, snaky warnings. Old women defending the virgins!

The bandaged men, and Garza, broke out into knowing laughter. Some of the old women cackled as el Toro paused before the bristling defense. El Toro haw-haw-hawed out as if this were the spice of life, and Fizzle mustered a dim grin.

"You had better eat before making love," suggested Garza with Mexican wit. "You might not eat afterwards."

Quick-wittedly Roberto gave this to the men in the Mexican tongue, for Garza had used English, and they roared with mirth. The women snickered.

El Toro and Fizzle fell to on the big tin plate of brown beans and beef cooked together and seasoned with chilli pepper. The lank woman ladled more to them in a moment or two.

"We could have white bread and fruit if the *Americanos* on the other side would consider us human," remarked Garza. "They think we are bandits who wish to cross over and make our home on the

Texas side. It seems to be their sole object to prevent us."

"This is first-class," declared el Toro in contentment. "A few platés o' this and I could shoot straight."

"But, man," protested the general, "you clipped the wings of the flying buzzard today when it approached over the field."

"With a Lewis gun like that," the American boasted mildly, "I can write my name on the moon."

Bobby put this over to the Mexicans, and laughter and admiring glances went el Toro's way. A talkative good fellowship set in.

"A man that shoots like you," observed Garza, "we'll need him tomorrow when Ocho makes his greatest attempt."

"Oh, you've got a dozen good men yet," complimented the American.

He thought he was about correct as to number. But Garza evaded by saying that a good man is always a welcome guest except in the house of evil.

"What," asked Larkin, "will Ocho do if he gets in?"

A kind of tinny laugh went down the line, as Bobby interpreted, and a pale fellow on a cot groaned. Garza said very sadly:

'Ocho is not named the Butcher for nothing. He never retains the wounded prisoners, and that is a fact, *señor*."

Fizzle was poised with a spoonful before his gawping mouth.

"What *does* he do?" he shot out.

Again the interpretation and the trickle of laughter. Two or three men simultaneously illustrated by drawing a finger across their throats.

"——!" exclaimed el Toro, shocked.

"That's why we keep the horses ready," said Garza.

WHEN they finished with the meal they sat and talked. The general made curious stabs at learning why the Americans were his guests. But Fizzle kept his nose to his plate, and when the corner got too tight, el Toro rose and sauntered away without a "by your leave."

For his part he had quite sufficient information to satisfy. Garza hoped to establish himself here at this port, get on to some sort of relations with the Americans and begin to trade, allowing goods to come in, protecting the stocks on their movements to interior towns and getting a treasury started thereby. The only fly in the ointment just now was Ocho, who wished to do the same thing, with two or three other things added but of minor importance, it appeared.

As he sauntered, el Toro felt good. He grinned at the girls, tried to make friends with an old woman.

Fizzle, not to be left behind or too far from the protecting hulk of his fellow American, got around after el Toro. They went peering into the rooms around the patio. In one were four new Lewis machine guns, several rifles still in their original factory grease, a couple of dozen blue automatic pistols, and ammunition, boxes of ammunition, stacked high.

"Loot!" rumbled el Toro to Fizzle, bending and trying to whisper it. "Cracky, kid, they's enough here to sell and make us rich!"

"To —— with the white-man stuff," whined Fizzle. "Let's get bedded down some place. No sleep last night worthy o' mention. I'm aweary."

But el Toro, interested to the bottom of his heart, went on peering. Beans, corn, jugs, what not. A quarter of a beef hanging in one corner—or a horse. Larkin got around and back to the table.

"You got a lot o' stuff," he said, and asked facetiously, "Y'ain't got a keg o' gold hid som'ers?"

"I have an abundance," said Garza pointedly, "to make fighting for me worth a good gunner's time."

"I don't aim to rush away in the heat o' the day," Larkin informed him.

"You'll be needed in the morning," Garza went on. "One of Ocho's men deserted today—an old friend of mine. He said Ocho has no food left save horsemeat. Nothing but that for three days. His men are desperate."

"They'll be fighting for their breakfast."

"You will——"

"Oh, I'll be on the western front. Don't worry about me."

And to himself he added—

"Couldn't run me off with all that loot in there."

"Time to get to sleep," the general abruptly announced. "There are blankets by the door. You may sleep here in the patio."

Larkin's heart was on the out-of-doors, where a man had elbow room to think of ways to corral loot, and there popped into his memory thought of the horses in the enclosure. He shot a look at Fizzle. The little man shook his head microscopically.

"Nope," decided el Toro, "we can't get to sleep in a crowd. We'll hit the shucks in the shack where we snoozed this morning after we crossed over."

Garza arose and shook hands with them in the generous Mexican way.

"You'll not desert me, eh, *amigos?*" he asked with a note of sadness common to him.

"Cross my heart," Larkin flappered. "I'm nutty about this burg."

"Then—" and the Mexican's sadness changed to claws—"no mischief shall befall you in an attempt to cross back into Texas tonight, eh?"

El Toro shut an eye, cocked his head to one side and regarded the general with pointed wisdom.

"I getcha," he said.

"I hope you do not sleep-walk," Garza continued. "One might meet a two-legged dragon in our town when war is on."

"Getcha again," admitted Larkin. "Any time you want to consult us we'll be at your service asleep in the shack."

They said good nights, the slight-built general bowing to el Toro until he was like a worshiper kowtowing to a heroic bronze idol that somehow had got pants on.

The Americans passed through the headquarters office into the night. There was something of a moon overhead. Larkin warned with a "*Zzzzt!*" and drew Fizzle to the hitch-rack.

"Let's wait a minute," he said. "That loot in there—if you and me, Fiz, could get that batch of automatics, and them four machine guns, and some more o' that stuff on board a few horses, me and you could drift down the Rio Grande on the Mexican side for a hundred miles—Eagle Pass maybe—and sell that stuff for enough whang to pay our way back into Kansas or some place."

Fizzle sucked in his breath.

"It'd beat chancin' these Mexes, he allowed. When they get through with us they might send us back across, or shoot us."

"Back across, kid—means one o' the prisons will be giving us convict clo'es to wear."

"And getting the loot means vi'lenc What you planning?"

"Planning *gettin' the plunder.*"

"Sure, I know, but——"

Fizzle paused to stare at the door, which had opened noiselessly, and they beheld Roberto step out without a sound. He came forward into the moonlight, saw them and jerked up with a grunt.

"Wantin' us already?" asked el Toro dryly.

"Looking at the moon," replied Roberto more quickly than an honest man finds it necessary to answer.

"There's no roof to the patio, Bobby, to hide the moon."

The Mexican caught his breath.

"Away from the noisy women to compose for sleep," he flashed.

"But, Bobby, the women are sad and quiet."

Bobby winced, and plunged into the accomplishment of a master-stroke by turning the subject.

"They are sad because Ocho pursues the rich man's daughter."

"What's that?"

El Toro was all question.

"The big 'un?" he asked.

Roberto laughed.

"The Señorita Mendoza, of the girls' school in Durango. Ocho has pursued her across all the distance of Mexico. Ah, yes, yes; the little one, *señor.*"

"And the big girl?"

"She has fallen into the depth of love with you, *señor.*"

"You're a liar," wheedled el Toro in the tone of a man who wishes to be shown he is wrong.

"Well," Bobby protested, "one of the women said, 'There's the man for you, Lupe,' and she flung her head and said, 'He'd have to catch me.' "

Fizzle snickered, and el Toro's eyes danced in the moonlight; but he changed the subject.

"Ocho—he's after the kid? Why?"

"Ask Garza. Ask anybody."

"I'm askin' you."

"Uh—naturally. Ocho saw her at the school in Durango. He offered to come up here in these northern States and carve out a republic of his own if she would flee with him. But Ocho has a reputation—and she hurried to her father with what he had said.

"There was a row, *señor;* ah, the sensation of Durango, then of Chihuahua. In

Chihuahua State Ocho assassinated her parent and her servant and some others of the Mendoza household and fled with the heiress, the general with a picked-up army pursuing her. Now he means to capture Alamos and trade through the port with Texas. And he has his picked brigade coming from the southwest."

"When will that brigade get here, eh?"

"Oh, two weeks."

Larkin was thoughtful for a moment. Then he drew out his big blue automatic and looked at it and looked at Bobby, and purred softly, so softly that Bobby cringed:

"Good night, Bobby. Yo' mam's callin' you, inside there."

"G'night," said Bobby instantly and slid into the house.

"Listen, kid," rumbled el Toro to Fizzle. "Did you whiff the smell o' that talk? Ocho comin' to steal a little woman, and to get him a town and a port. Fiz, me and you is going to fade his bet."

"Vi'lence, Larkin," whispered the little man, shivering.

"Me and you, kid, is going to take the women our ownselves, and the loot, and the port, and leave Ocho out in the rain. We'll be kings, kid—kings on the rim o' trouble, but kings!"

And the Bull danced a breakdown in the dust.

"When things get so hot they begin to blister we can load the loot on to the horses and hike to Eagle Pass. We'll fatten the horses."

"Dang it, Larkin, quit your blabbin' and let's shove them horses off to water now."

"Kid, with all this comin' our way—women and plunder, and a kind of a cannibal kingdom like—dog eat dog—we got to celebrate."

"Aw, dang it——"

"We got to get the hooch," el Toro waded on. "Them jugs we seen—I smelled liquor. It lit on the end o' my nose like a bee, and she's there till yet."

"They'll be vi'lence, Larkin," warned the little man. "We got to let them beasts out."

El Toro seized Fizzle by the arm and scooted him around the corner of the building and some distance along its blank stone side to a window head-high to the tall man. And Larkin upped with Fizzle so that he could work at it.

"Can you open it?" demanded el Toro.

For answer the pigmy soldier swung it in on its hinges, and Larkin began to crowd him through. It was like putting a cat into a keg. Fizzle did not dare to speak, nor to make a racket, but he did spider himself out.

"Double up, double up!" ordered Larkin fiercely. "I'll tie some o' your laigs into a knot!"

Fizzle let himself be crammed through. Larkin plunged his face to the opening, breathing like a hurried horse. He found Fizzle's head not six inches distant.

"Listen, you fool!" hissed Fizzle.

And Larkin stopped his very breathing to listen to the lowest, sweetest song he had ever heard, and to watch the most delicate picture.

Señorita Mendoza and Guadalupe sat in repose by the cooking-fire, the flickering blaze lighting them, their gaze far away in maidens' dreams. Off in the darkness a guitar was thrummed and men's and women's voices sang sweet and low. El Toro had never heard such silver-sweet tones.

He drew back half a pace, strangely moved. He looked up at the twinkling stars in the sky. He heard the door again, and made out a man, probably Roberto, obliquing off toward the shack down the hillside. Now and then a rifle-shot cracked around the town. Across the river dim lights shone in Mariposa, where he could go no more. And in the blackness of a mesquite bush el Toro heard the queer, clear little twitter of the night bird.

The crudeness of the fleshy mind dropped away from el Toro, and he was tamed. An impulse crossed his mind. He wished to give something, to give, to give——

The tender singing melted away into silence. Larkin looked in at the window again—and grunted. For Guadalupe had risen, and she stood before the fire in other garments than the ones she had worn. What they were, how she was clothed, el Toro could not tell, for his eyes were dazzled. But a scarlet-and-green mantilla flowed around her as she began to dance in a slow rhythm on her naked toes.

Larkin was entranced, but not sufficiently to forget that the Mexican would not find him and Fizzle at the shack. He kept looking back over his left shoulder, and in a moment he saw the man, and knew he was Roberto, trotting back toward headquarters, his shoes clattering among the shaley stones.

A tambourine rattle began. The girl within was doing some sort of Carmen dance, graceful as the bending of a poplar tree before the wind.

Roberto came on.

The girl's dance was faster and faster, like successful sin. El Toro's heart pounded. He knew then that nothing could rob him of this woman.

Roberto slammed through the door of headquarters.

"Hand out a jug!" commanded el Toro, reaching into the darkness and clawing for Fizzle.

The girl changed her dance, or progressed to another stage of it. She stood tiptoe, lifting her lips as if to a lover, a *tall* lover, like el Toro!

Then square into his face came the jug, set upon the sill by Fizzle. El Toro jerked it down; and behind it, as if the whole thing were a trick to deceive an audience, came Fizzle's head, and el Toro dragged him out like a rag on a string. But in the process there was a crash and rattle within as if a pyramid of jugs had disintegrated.

The two Americans plunged down the hill, Larkin carrying the jug under his arm as if it were a football.

"Oh, boy!" he raved. "In the mornin' we'll corral the loot and the women and be kings of this hill!"

"Thousand jugs—in that room," panted Fizzle. "I dislodged 'em."

Voices sounded back at the stone building, and shots. A bullet or two cracked overhead. El Toro led the way in a circle, and in a moment they were heading back up the hill toward the shack, which was perhaps two hundred yards from headquarters.

"You're—some runner—for a king," observed Fizzle in gasps.

"Reg'lar—sled runner! But I got the jug."

In a moment they were in the one-room adobe that was minus its window and door frames. They leaned against the walls to regain their breath. They stared a little toward the stone structure, but no one appeared to be coming.

"Now," said El Toro, "we'll start the Fourth o' July!"

He slung the big jug upon his right arm, like a Kansas harvest hand with a sweaty jug of cool water. He jerked out the cork with his teeth and spat it across the room.

"Here's to you, 'Lupe," he toasted, and with a tilt of his elbow he kissed the mouth of the jug and drew in a great swallow of the liquor.

Then the jug shot away from him, and he spat explosively. And before Fizzle could dodge through the door Larkin had him.

The giant lifted the little man above his head in one strong-armed swoop. And the motion was as if he meant to smash Fizzle to the earth, and he did intend to; but he caught himself, and set him down easily.

"Haw-haw-haw!" he bellowed. "The joke's on me. 'Lupe's goin' to enjoy it when I tell her I drunk her health in lubricatin'-oil!"

"DANG it all, Larkin," protested Fizzle, "quit greasin' up stale jokes and come on and help with them horses."

"Stale jokes!" roared the Bull. "Why, you ravelin' from a buzzard's nest!"

"Hey, the Mexican's coming," Fizzle said from the door.

In a moment Roberto brought up short before the door when he saw them.

"Some of Ocho's men tried to climb in at a window at headquarters," he said glibly. "The general told me to tell you so you would not be scared."

El Toro sought for adequate retort, but only sputtered.

"The general sent you a candle," said Roberto.

He struck a match instantly, and its flare, then the light of the growing candle-flame, illumined the shack and the wreck of the broken jug with its thick oil spread through the dust. Roberto whiffed and began to giggle, and left.

The Americans leaned against the raw adobe of the door sides and watched the spy fade away in the night, in the direction of the stone building, which was almost half-way around the compass from the corral.

"Them horses!" urged Fizzle. "Dang it all, Larkin——"

"Come on! Them horses will be part of the loot—as many of 'em as we need to carry the stuff off."

As they made their way with some caution across the hillside, ascending gradually to the corral, el Toro talked of the value of the loot and the probability of selling it to somebody on the American

side in the neighborhood of Eagle Pass with the idea that the somebody could peddle it again to the Mexicans.

"We gotta get away with it," he averred.

"Means a monstrous lot," Fizzle agreed. "Money to eat on and travel on for a while."

"Means everything," declared Larkin. "We got to keep our eyes peeled for the main chance from now on, believe me."

They increased their caution on drawing nearer the noise of the slowly shifting horse-herd. Their ears were keened for every sound—for a voice, or the rattle of a gun, or a sudden shift of the animals. At the fence they stood unmoving for five minutes; then Fizzle whispered softly—

"Hostlers and everybody turned in to bed."

They put themselves through the wires, one to open the gate, the other to drive the herd out—and shots cracked from across the horses' backs, up the hill. The two dropped down and began to wiggle under the bottom wire.

"So blinkin' close," rumbled el Toro, referring to the bullets, "their tails tickled my face."

They made off, and rounded up presently at the shack. El Toro remembered their blankets on the hitch-rack and went for them.

"I'm going to get some sleep," he asserted on his return. "Carousing most o' last night."

"Horses got to be watered," Fizzle asserted with equal strength of opinion. "You sleep, I'll watch, and turn 'em out later."

"We got to get some sleep, I tell you, for the battle in the morning. We got to be ready to clean up on Ocho and slip Garza the double-x somehow. All he wants outa us is to fight for him. After the war he would slip us a lemon. But me and you is going to feather our own nests, hey?"

"Them horses——"

"Horses? Can the blinkin' broncs, can'tcha? For once, kid? Don'tcha never think of hard old plunder, kid? Or hooch? Or women? Ain't you got neither a thought er a word for that little Mendoza skirt?"

"Women is vi'lence, Larkin, and horses is loot. And say, while we're grabbing tomorrow, I want——"

El Toro chuckled.

"Coming to it, hey? What you getting sly about, kid? You don't get that tambourine she danced with!"

"That big iron kettle, Larkin, that they cooked their supper in over the fire. Send it to my maw—if I can raise some coin to pay the freight, and you ain't got your heart set on it yo' ownself, Lark?"

"Gug-glug-glglglg!" spluttered Larkin. "You fool! You——"

Then he choked off altogether, and ended with shaking both fists futilely high in the air.

"Don't get all bushed up, Larkin," advised Fizzle mildly.

THE February night was cool, even inside the four walls of the old adobe. The Bull stretched out on his back and drew his blanket up to his chin. But Fizzle sat up with his back to the pebbly wall, where he could see out into the moon-haze through the doorless doorway.

"I *gotta* stay awake," he told himself.

But he did not. He was awakened by el Toro shaking him and chuckling.

"Wouldn't nothing crop out on you, you Iron Pot!" the big fellow was saying along with the chuckles. "'S all right, kid. Let's go and turn out the ponies."

Fizzle rubbed his eyes. The moon was gone. It was the darkest hour before the dawn. He shivered when the cool wind got into his shirt.

"I figgered on coming to, about this hour," Larkin said, leading out. "Bet the Mexicans is all asleep. If they ain't, Fizzle, it is because things is sure looking desper-ate for them."

They stumbled off down the hill, stopping now and then to listen. As they got more awake they mended their steps to make less noise on the rattling stones. They began to go more slowly, making certain. Occasionally they whispered.

No sound was audible or movement visible. The caution required time. Pale day began to be hinted at on the remote jagged mountain horizon when they let down the wire gate. All the black blotches of horses seemed to turn their heads and cock their ears. One or two sighed deeply.

"Stand here and don't let 'em out too fast," bossed Fizzle. "They'll get to running if you let 'em. Whole army would be down on us then."

The first dense shadow began to move

and as it got to the gateway Fizzle was leading it by the foretop. There, its ears tilted forward, it heaved a quick bark of a sigh, and started riverward with stretching neck.

Fizzle led another horse up, and a third one. Then he got into the herd and began to move them, talking softly. The bunch got on the move. Larkin kept them from racing through, or tried to, but at the last they all but ran him down, and went through with a rattle and thunder.

"Dang!" cringed Fizzle.

"It'll raise Mexico!" Larkin swore.

"*Bueno!*" exclaimed a voice behind them.

The Americans flashed around, face to face with a Mexican.

"*Americanos!*" gasped the fellow.

And the trio stood for seconds, guns down, staring, and in those seconds there appeared two other armed Mexicans out of the darkness commanding—

"*Halto!*"

"Oh!" said the surprized voice of Bobby as he peered close to them. "It's you guys! I thought it was Ocho's men."

Quick as a flash he gave the first Mexican butts right with his rifle, square in the face, knocking the man down. Roberto's comrade jerked away the fellow's rifle.

"I thought," said Roberto, "it was three of Ocho's men stealing our horses. But it was only one of his men. And you guys, spies! It will be the blank wall for yours at sunrise!"

GENERAL GARZA inspected the rifles of the firing-squad to see that they were properly loaded with ball cartridges containing good caps. The first prisoner for execution stood against the wall near the window where el Toro had beheld the Indian girl dancing. He saw that the stone was chipped away somewhat—with bullets of former executions presumably.

Though the sky was clear of any fleck of cloud, the sun had not reddened the East sufficiently to make the world light, and the fire on the cigaret that the prisoner smoked nonchalantly could be seen glowing as the Mexican drew at it.

Larkin and Fizzle stood with their arms bound behind them. El Toro, because he had put up a fight and got himself beaten with rifles and pistols before he was finally tied, bled in a half-dozen places, and his undershirt was torn completely away. He spat blood. Fizzle trembled as if he were freezing.

Neither man seemed to be aware of his physical state. Their fascinated eyes were nailed to the man who in a moment would be shot. The man was he who had been captured a half-hour before with the Americans. He strode rapidly back and forth, back and forth, smoking furiously.

Garza finished with inspecting the firing-squad, which was made up of three bandaged men and Bobby. The general stepped back. He gave an order. The four men slammed their guns down. Larkin and Fizzle jumped. Garza laughed at them.

"Be a man, Fizzle!" begged el Toro in a strained whisper.

"It's the dang—hungry way—he smokes his cigaret," chattered Fizzle. "Puts the jumps in me."

"*Americanos* can't stand it, can they?" commented Garza as a man would of a weakness in other men where his own racial strength would be. "More than once in six years I have seen 'white men' puke at executions."

The prisoner at the wall stopped his pacing abruptly. He stepped out, facing the firing-squad.

"*Estoy listo!*" he called in a high voice. "I am ready."

He pulled his shirt-front open. He seemed to stare over the heads of the squad, still as a statue. The flock of women came unexpectedly around the corner of the building. A quiet settled over the morning.

Fizzle almost fainted, and, holding to el Toro, began to retch.

The firing-squad giggled, except one man. Some of the women snickered. But the man by the wall never moved, other than to fling down his cigaret. Its fire scattered on the wind in a thousand sparks.

"Brace up!" jerked out el Toro.

"White-man courage," said Garza unpleasantly. "Racial characteristics will crop out."

"*Estoy listo!*" the man called again.

"Look here," said el Toro, facing Garza earnestly, "don't shoot that man, bo. Your fuss and Ocho's will be over in a week, but this man, he'll be a gone goslin'."

Garza paused and regarded the Americans speculatively.

"Ah," said he, "I'll grant your wish—for a moment. I'll give him some pleasure before we shoot him and you two fellows. Pedro!" he called.

A squat man left the firing-squad and came forward. His head was bandaged, he was swarthy, and his arms vied with Larkin's for strength.

"The whip," ordered Garza. "Give this little trembler ten lashes."

"What the blinkin' Santy Fee!" exclaimed el Toro, incredulous.

The squat man drew a short, stout black-snake whip from the bag of his shirt at the waist. The women, twittering, came forward.

"Stick to it like a man," rumbled el Toro in Fizzle's ear. "He's bluffing. He won't shoot us ner whip us either."

"I'd give a dollar for a strong stummick."

"Won't shoot us, specially."

A tall man dropped his rifle and came from the firing-squad, a pleading hand out to his general. The Americans did not grasp his words, but it was evident he was pleading for Fizzle. Garza brushed him back impatiently; but the man, his face fanatically alight, came in again. The commander struck him a quick blow in the face. Thereupon the man held back, hesitant.

El Toro gave his wrist bonds a tug. He swayed toward Garza. It was as if he were itching to start a hurly-burly.

"Juan," said General Garza, nodding to the man he had struck, "is like some Americans I've seen—a big heart and a foolish head. They call him Saint John."

Pedro stepped up to Fizzle and with one savage tug stripped off his undershirt. The assault all but jerked the little man off his feet.

The whipper stepped back and lashed once with all his might. A cry or two came from the women. A welt, and blood, flashed on Fizzle's back. He shivered from head to foot, like a boat that has struck dock piling; but no murmur passed his lips, nor did he take his hard gaze from the squat Mexican.

Pedro came down again with another hissing blow. He raised his whip the third time. Then Larkin plunged in.

The Bull threw himself bodily upon the whipper. They fought—the whipper with his three-foot leather lash with shot on the end, and el Toro with his feet and his shoulders; a kicking, butting fight.

It was monstrous, like prehistoric men contesting in chaos. It seemed el Toro would be cut to ribbons. He strove to break his wrist bonds.

And he did break them. And when the whipper saw it, he threw down his whip and turned and ran with all his squat might toward the trench on the westward.

As el Toro stood panting, blood trickling down his skin and scanty clothing, Juan of the big heart appeared out of the dust and fight haze with a can of water and a soft cloth and began sopping at Larkin's wounds.

Then without warning there came a blast of rifle-fire from the up-river side. No doubt but that it was Ocho's morning battle for breakfast in the town. There was a scurrying of the women. Men grasped their guns.

Garza shouted something in Mexican and turned to gesture toward the prisoner by the wall. But the prisoner had disappeared.

IF THE hunger of Ocho's men outside the town could be measured by the ferocity of their attack, their bellies must have been squeezed tight with their belts. For the Butcher's thirty or so men kept the twelve—all that Garza could muster, not counting two women and the Americans—as busy as they ever had been in any fight.

Ocho fought for the town at a disadvantage. To arrive at the trench of Garza, the attackers must make their way up a comparatively open slope, what cover there was being scattered boulders and sotol and yucca stalks. To overcome this deficiency of cover he had scooped out small machine-gun shelters, or foxholes, behind the boulders. Some attempt was made at camouflaging these.

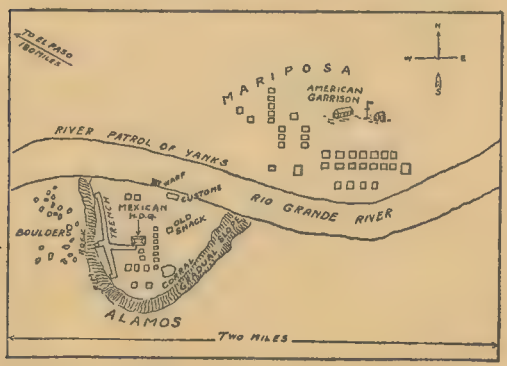
It is probable that if Ocho had not known of other Mexican leaders being punished for permitting their bullets to fall on American soil, he would have made his attack from any other of the available sides. But the menace of the Yankee promise, whether official or not, was sufficient, as it had been with others on his side of the Rio Grande.

So he fought up-hill and did a good piece of work at that. In his growing desperation to be in the port of Alamos Ocho had, in the night, advanced his foxholes and camouflaging until a scant hundred yards of no-man's land lay between his soldiers and the rim of the mesa, where Garza held forth.

In this furious daybreak outburst el Toro fought in the main and middle one of three concrete machine-gun nests. Literally it was little more than behind a wall, so far as

he could tell, though he did not know what it was like on the front.

At first el Toro fought sullenly and without much effort, for Garza had walked him and the unprotesting Fizzle to the trench and had put over him an armed bully of a



fellow with a pistol to see that he stayed and used the Lewis gun. Fizzle had been sent to one of the two smaller, or less well-built, nests. The guard over Larkin worked diligently, however, at refilling the ammunition drums, which held fifty cartridges, and placing fresh ones on the gun.

But with the sun reddening the east over a mountain horizon, like a great conflagration lighting the world, Ocho's men burst out in a charge. It was amazing. El Toro realized that his fortunes were wrapped up with Garza's and that it was no time to sulk, so he fought in earnest.

The attack advanced rapidly. It was apparent that the little handful of defenders would be overwhelmed—or so it seemed to el Toro in a second of panic, and he set the gun up on top of the wall and began to operate it from there, standing on ammunition boxes.

And he broke the attack and drove the men back, by sheer markmanship and rapid firing. The guard over him worked like fury getting new drums on.

Presently the sun ascended like a fiery balloon, and its rays cut down across the mesa's rim and into the eyes of Ocho's army, so that their vision was interfered with. Seeing this, el Toro's curiosity, which had been planted the day before, to see what the outside of the trench looked like, to assure himself of its solidity, blossomed out in full. He climbed over the wall and ran a dozen steps into no-man's land.

The whole land seemed to pause, to hold silent with wonder at what the big American could be doing by such rashness.

The wall, he saw, was partly of rim rock as it had fallen, and at the nests, or semi pill-boxes, there was an abundance of boulders stacked up. But the feature was that the rock everywhere was painted with black bars and oblongs and splotches. He had been firing through a port or horizontal slot two feet long inside, with a wider spread outside, and about four inches high. This could be narrowed down by a sliding strip of rusty iron.

But to save him he could not, in the moment he had to try, pick out the port-hole from among the black camouflages.

He scrambled up the rocks and to the wall, a few shots ricochetting on the boulders around him. Back inside, he saw that there was a black background made from a painted blanket to the rear of the pill-box or nest.

As if the shots at el Toro as he scrambled back into the works had been an awakener, the firing now was resumed. El Toro stretched out on the floor, put the nose of the gun at the slot and lay ready for work. As the sun ascended Ocho's fighters became more in earnest again, and it was not long until the firing was resumed in full, though lacking the vicious edge it had shown at the first.

In the middle of this Garza came in along the trench that started back about forty yards and deepened as it zigzagged to the main trench. This approach trench was for no other purpose than to offer safe access to the fighting-works.

"—— women!" the general exclaimed. "I've never liked them for camp-followers."

"You don't have to keep a guard over me to make me fight," groused Larkin. "I'm liable to go gunnin' for him."

"Ah!" gushed the commandant in the extremely polite manner he could assume. "That was tremendous, that gun on the wall. Such courage! Such markmanship!"

"But how about this bird guardin' me?"

"And the execution—the threat to shoot you and Señor—ah—Fizzle; but a joke, my dear Larkin, a little good humor before breakfast."

"The lash on Fizzle's back? Joke too?"

"My dear man," protested Garza, "I must maintain discipline. The whole thing was but show. For you and the splendid young man, Señor—ah—Fizzle, I entertain

the most affectionate feeling of brotherly fondness."

"Yeah——"

"You like the ladies, eh?"

"Uhmm," mused el Toro, looking hard at Garza and pondering this new and abrupt slant. "I pick my own," he said.

"Oh, *sí, sí,* most assuredly. You will continue to render assistance to me and my little army of patriots?"

"I'm helpin' ain't I?"

"Splendidly. And I but wished to say that if you continue— Well, easy days, *señor.* A word to the wise, as you northern people say. I hear it whispered the girl Lupe is in love with you!"

El Toro brightened at this, but he said nothing, turning to the more serious subject of Ocho's hot little fight.

The commandant called off the guard. Two wounded men came presently to fill drums and help otherwise. A pretty stiff bit of shooting continued. It was apparent even to the half-accustomed ear of Larkin that Ocho had at least six machine-guns going, while Garza had but three, Fizzle being at one.

"And Fizzle couldn't hit the State o' Kansas," thought el Toro, "if he was in a balloon up over Wichita."

El Toro was wise enough, from wide experience in the rough-and-tumble of this human existence, to forget his resentment and the unpleasant things of the morning, and look to the present and the future.

"Women," kept running through his thoughts, "and loot, and hooch."

They were all right here—if the Mexicans were out of the way. The thought crossed his mind once that if he could hide out until Ocho cleaned up on Garza he could come in then and by some hook or crook clean up on Ocho and the few men he might have left.

"Kings on the rim o' trouble—a king, and with that girl Lupe!"

The thought held him.

"If there ever was a chance," he thought as the rapid fire of the gun vibrated his great body as a pneumatic riveter does—"if a dud from a railroad camp ever had a chance to clean up on the game, I've got it—me and Fizzle."

Women, and loot, and hooch!

Fizzle came along after a while.

"Ain't this awful?" he made comment. "D'you reckon they don't eat breakfast in Mexico?"

"Hey, listen, kid," prefaced Larkin enthusiastically. "Think up some kind of a scheme to get rid o' these Mexes, and we'll seize this port and run things for a while. If a port's good for Garza or Ocho, it's good for us."

"Dang the vi'lence, Larkin. I'm going to hunt breakfast."

"Bring us some in yo' hat. And think up a blinkin' scheme o' some kind, Fiz."

"We can't clean up on all these Mexes."

"Can't? What the blinkin' Santy Fee?"

"No, we can't."

"Cracky, Fiz, don't say can't," instructed El Toro. "Try being a man once. Take a good chaw o' tobacker, line up six good cuss-words and smear some chicken blood on your britches, and go swaggerin' around high, wide and windy, and you got the world licked."

"But not the devil," allowed Fizzle. "You're trimming your sails for trouble."

"I—" began el Toro, and broke off in a quick grunt.

He twisted his right arm and looked at fresh blood welling up from the knuckle-bone of his wrist.

"A bullet nicked me," he said.

IN FIFTEEN minutes Fizzle was back in the trench. He brought a hand-basin nearly full of brown beans cooked in a thick soup, and spoons. And he waited for Larkin and the two Mexicans to clean up the supply before he broke some startling news to his comrade in arms.

"The women are pullin' out," he announced.

"Hey? What the blinkin' Hades you saying?"

"They want to see you. 'Señor Larkin,' says she, and smiles."

"She? Lupe?"

"Naw! The skinny woman that speaks our kind o' talk. They're leaving. They're trying to save that Mendoza girl."

"From what?"

"You come along and see. They want you. They're afraid Ocho is coming in. That feller they was going to shoot—they say he has gone back and told Ocho how short we are o' men in here. They say Ocho'll be bustin' through any minute."

"Where are they?"

"Herding like refugees down on the hillside toward the river."

Larkin reared his huge bronzed form to his feet.

"Come on," said he. "I'm —— if she gets away. Or if Ocho gets in. *I'm* dealin' this game, *me*."

On beyond headquarters, past the last of the poor adobes, they saw the women, and four wounded men, sitting on the stony ground, waiting and watching.

The gaunt woman who had waited on table the night before put up the situation to him in English. With the *señor's* help they could cross into Mariposa and be safe there.

"You're safe here," el Toro declared a bit sulkily. "Me, and Garza and his men, can stand off Ocho and forty more like him."

She held up her hands in amazement.

"Ocho the Butcher?" she demanded.

"Or the candlestick maker, or whatever he is. Garza will protect the women, and I'll help him."

"No, no, *señor*. You do not know Garza. He does not like the women in his camps. They are unwelcome. He tells us we came without an invitation and can go when we choose without asking him."

El Toro shook his head stubbornly.

"Naw, you can't cross over. You stay here, see?"

"No-no!" the woman cried. "To save the maiden, *señor?* With your help, your presence in the boat, we can cross. Without you they will fire upon us."

"Why not Fizzle?" asked Larkin, wondering why she insisted so upon himself.

"He says he has no influence, that you are the Big One."

Larkin shook his head again and started to turn away, determined the girl should not leave. But the Mexican woman got hold of his arm and began a wild plea. A story was spread out there that caught the ear mightily.

Ocho, in pleasant Durango, had gone to the house of Señor Mendoza as a guest, somewhat unwelcome but nevertheless a guest at a grand ball. And he had asked later for the hand of the *señorita* in marriage. But the fond father knew of the half-bandit warrior's evil reputation and had him flung out of the house.

That night Ocho with a handful of his men had surrounded the house. Mendoza had been warned of this, and he and his family and many servants, including this woman who talked, had fled to a remote *hacienda* of the rich man.

But wo, wo, wo! The evil butcherer of the innocent and wounded had followed, and had assassinated the girl's father before her eyes, and had made her prisoner; but by the aid of faithful ones, including herself, most of this party had escaped. Only two of the women now present had been in Alamos when the refugees arrived.

And she who spoke had been governess of the girl from the day of her birth, and had learned English and French solely to instruct her darling, and had nourished her in goodness and beauty, and now to see her again in the hands of the monster shouting at the gates. Ah, *señor, señor!*

She fell upon her knees, kissing his hand. El Toro pulled loose. He looked at the women and the girl, and every eye was upon him. Little Señorita Mendoza, little Josefa, was tense as a high note, looking at him, pleading with great eyes.

"Ocho *might* get in," said Fizzle, looking away, half-afraid to speak.

El Toro was very uncomfortable.

"But——!" he rumbled. "I can't go across any more than you can. Ten years o' prison!"

"We can put 'em on the boat and drift them down the river, and they can land on the other side when they get past the soldiers."

"And lose Lupe?"

Fizzle turned and looked with scorn at el Toro, and el Toro flushed under the dust and blood and dirt that covered his face, and he muttered—

"Women and children first."

Then he saw the absurdity of this and mumbled—

"Save the skirts."

Reluctantly he suggested to the woman that they might float down-stream.

"I'm —— if I turn a hand to help you," he swore, looking at Guadalupe.

"Ocho would follow us to the end of the river and out upon the sea," she wailed. "Look!"

She shot out an arm to the down-river side and to the inland country.

"What the blinkin' Santy Fee!" he demanded.

To the eastward, a good rifle-shot back from the river, was a horseman, standing quiet. Father back from the stream was another, and to the southeast still another. Outposts set by Ocho to watch all exits. Only by the river, and straight across, was there a way out.

The sinister ring put fear into Larkin for

the first time. And it must have been reflected in his face, for Josefa herself unexpectedly spoke:

"*Señor, señor el bueno!* Spare me, Josefa!"

The soft singing of the night before, when there had been within his spirit the desire to give, came back to el Toro. Then the purity of this impulse became muddled with the disinclination to surrender the big girl. In a kind of despair he began to growl:

"Blasted luck! Women in danger—gotta help 'em—let our white-man stuff slide——"

"Ocho *might* get in," reminded Fizzle. "We better hurry."

"You yaller streak!" exploded Larkin viciously. "You going over with 'em?"

At this, the little man squeezed his hands together and puckered his lips and made a kind of thick, see-sawing whistle. The temptation was tremendous.

"Yohoo!" shouted el Toro, as if he were driving a herd of cattle. "Get to movin'! Go on!"

They started off down the hill.

The boat was a square-built wooden affair that was used in the times between factional disturbances for rafting freight back and forth. It would have held probably thirty people. A makeshift of a floating wharf let the refugees out to it. One corner of the craft rested on the sand.

Three of the four wounded men in the group had to be helped in. They were soon all aboard, with their bundles and packs and candlesticks and a long-spurred rooster. Larkin untied the painter.

"All set?" he demanded shortly. "Fizzle?" he sneered.

"I ain't going," said Fizzle miserably.

"But you accompany us, *señor*, no?" asked the woman of Larkin.

Larkin bent his weight against the bow to shove off.

"No!" he grunted.

The woman leaped over the side like an athlete. She sprang into the shallow water and clawed at el Toro, forcing him to relent in his effort to get the tub into the clutch of the stream.

"But *señor, señor!*" she wailed. "We dare not go without you."

There was a pause. For several minutes there had been a rising volume of firing back upon the hill. Now all ears seemed to catch it, and to interpret significance. It heaved more heavily, like blowing rain on the window.

"You got to get back up there," Fizzle ventured. "Give her a note. Tell her to wave an American flag."

"You nut," slammed el Toro; then in utter exasperation he became mild. "They ain't no store around here nearer than a block that's selling flags, honey."

And to the woman:

"I'll give you a piece of writing. Hold it up when the soldiers holler to you and it will be all right."

The woman was disappointed, but she saw that she must give in. She canvassed the crowd, and a wounded Mexican dug up a note-book and pencil. El Toro wrote on a leaf from that, using the gunwale of the boat for a desk. When he finished he handed the result to Fizzle for inspection.

Loteent Goggle-ies
R'c'd this date from pvt. Larkin 13 Mex including Loopy. Eny port in a storm.

"You ain't signed it," said Fizzle.

Larkin moistened the pencil thoughtfully, and with a grin to himself he signed—

LARKIN, KING.

The lean one clutched the passport and tied it in a corner of her black mantilla. Larkin stepped to the side of the boat where Lupe sat on an empty nail-keg. He thrust out a huge hand to that black-haired, red-cheeked, hard-fleshed beauty.

"By-by, Lupe," said he with the drag of regret in his tone.

She sniffed and turned her back on him. In a flare of wrath Larkin lifted the boat and pressed against it, in a tempestuous effort to overturn the thing in the river. So near did he succeed that the passengers were sent sliding to one side. Then the current caught the old square tub and drew it away.

The Bull ran after it a half-dozen steps, shaking his fist.

Lupe threw back her head and laughed at him.

"You seed o' Eve!" he bellowed. "You need a dressin'-down!"

And then he laughed too, at himself.

AS THE forenoon went on, all the great cup between the mountain clumps hot with unadulterated sunshine, Larkin lay in the pill-box and fired when necessary, and thought of a great many different things.

His mental attitude varied, sweeping back and forth like the changing moods of a harp.

Sometimes he did not care whether school kept or not. He was tempted to sleep—having been awake most of the previous two nights—and let Ocho come in if he wished.

On the other hand he frequently fired with the spirit of a small boy flinging rocks at a cat. It kept Ocho's men ducking. Now and then he was tempted to go out and drive Ocho's whole army into the river. For he blamed that leader for his loss of the woman phase of his adventure. Why be a king without a queen!

Curiously enough, he never once blamed any instinct or act of his own for the women's absence. He did not think with regret—

"I could have kept them here."

Because of danger the women *had had to go*. He had learned that mode from his Kentucky granddad.

Curiously enough, too, there was a sort of squeamishness in him about shooting to kill out there in the holes and rocks. Since it was now solely for plunder it had the smack of murder. The whole affair had been a lark, except in those high moments when he was actually protecting himself, and the others incidentally; then he had fought to keep the enemy off.

Really, down to brass tacks, Larkin felt rather than reasoned all this. He just had a sense that it wasn't quite square for him to kill without reason. So he fired mostly to keep the Mexicans under cover and from a free use of their guns.

Yet Larkin realized he was face to face with the roughness of a rough man's existence. Ocho was an enemy, and the law on the north side of the river was an enemy now, and between two such evils one must have money to get out. And money could be obtained, by good luck, from the plunder around this little mud village, if the plunder could be peddled, say, in Eagle Pass.

So el Toro pondered and half-dozed, and pondered, and wondered what had become of Fizzle.

Sometimes the sun burned his back, and he would turn on his side. The Mexican with him to refill drums was equally uncomfortable. About the time Larkin began to realize that he was drying up of thirst Fizzle showed up with a pail of tepid water.

The day went on. Buzzards drifted overhead, not so high as buzzards scanning a wide landscape. Sometimes they dropped down until el Toro shot wing-feathers from them, for the benefit of Ocho.

Twice the hunters outside rose up from their rocks and holes in a long line and made desperate effort to cross no-man's land. At these times everybody fought with all the zeal in him, and even Larkin, good shot that he was, learned that it was a different thing to get dodging men, when there are a lot of them, each needing to be stopped, from what it is to spot up a catskin.

After the second onset, in which they were driven back, Garza informed el Toro that all his men had finally been wounded. Four were killed, too, he said, and he himself was hit in one side. El Toro had received his first serious wound also. A bullet had penetrated his arm, near the right wrist joint, and had run up, evidently between the muscles, and come out near the elbow.

Since the Mexicans on the hillside were laying off for the time being, el Toro contented himself with stanching the flow of blood by pressing with thumb and fore-finger.

When the sun cast the narrowest of shadows in the pill-box Larkin remembered that over across the river kitchen police would be calling out—

"Come and get it!"

He hoped Fizzle would bring some "horse and beans."

He got to thinking about the tales of atrocities performed by the runty commander outside—of this place and that where throats of wounded men, and sometimes of sound prisoners, had been cut. He even recalled stories he had heard in Mariposa of the misdeeds of the man.

"My granddad," he speculated, "would have gone out and got him with a squirrel rifle."

Somehow this convinced el Toro of the total depravity of Ocho. There was no longer the slightest doubt that the leader did exactly those things credited to him.

Time sped on. The afternoon on the hillside and the mesa became droningly quiet. The shadow of the wall began to cover Larkin. The Mexican helper fell asleep.

At last el Toro slept.

INTO steadfast and regular snoring Fizzle burst like a rocket. Larkin, indeed, sat up abruptly, thinking the battle had broken loose, or that one of the watchmen had exploded his little hand bomb.

'——'s to pay!" the little man panted. "They've beat it!"

"Beat it?" echoed Larkin hazily.

"Garza, all his men! All wounded. All pulled out!"

"Pulled out," murmured Larkin.

"And they've took the loot!"

"Took the loot."

"Wake up!" spat Fizzle.

And the Bull awakened. He reached out and took Fizzle by the shoulder and jerked him close.

"The loot? They've gone with it? You mean that?"

"Yeah, 'eah!" squirmed the little man. "Leggo! Leave off! They've hit out east with the stuff on the horses."

"Horses?"

Larkin was incredulous.

"A horse went back into the corral. They rode him around to get up the others."

"But I didn't know they left the trench."

And to see if indeed they had, el Toro rolled out a few feet until he could look along the length of the works. No moving men were there, but four quiet figures lay along the back of the trench—the morning's score for Ocho.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Larkin demanded.

"They held me. Reckon they thought you could hold off Ocho while they made the get-away. They took me a mile out of town before they let me go."

"By ——!" swore the Bull. "They don't get away with this."

He got up and paced back and forth, spitting tobacco-juice from a huge cud. The need of the loot was to the fore again in his mind.

"What did Garza say?" he asked. "How did he excuse himself?"

"He shrugged his shoulders and said: 'What's the use? We're shot to pieces. We're doomed,' says he. 'If we stay Ocho gets all of my men. This way some escapé.' He was almost crying. He says, 'You Yankees can always take care o' yourselves.' "

"Ain't it true!" retorted el Toro grimly. "Did they take all the horses?"

"They turned some of 'em out, and coming back I headed them into the corral again. They 're there now."

"Come on! We'll catch 'em up. We'll take a machine gun and clean up on that bunch of traitors. We'll get that plunder. You and me can lick 'em without blinkin' an eye!"

"Yes," agreed Fizzle. "We could, but we can't."

"Can't? Why can't we?"

"Because they's four wounded men in headquarters. Can't be moved. We can't leave them to Ocho's cutthroats, can we?"

The Bull's fury flared like an oil fire. His fingers clutched at the giver of bad news. Fizzle slid aside. El Toro tried to speak. He could make no adequate sounds. He was like a man making a twisting effort to break bonds or shoulder a huge load. Then he dropped down at the gun and began firing it tempestuously.

Fizzle said never a word, now that he saw el Toro's opinion about leaving the wounded men was like his own. He just waited like a little wise owl. The drum ran out. Larkin lay silent, staring through the port. And when the emotion had burned itself out, he spoke again, and spoke quietly—

"Looks like it don't never rain but the cloud busts."

Then in a moment he whipped out bitterly—

"Why'd them wounded men have to *be*, anyhow?"

Fizzle kept silent. El Toro reared to his feet.

"A man ain't licked this easy," he declared. "Maybe we can do something—get them wounded on horses and take in after Garza and the loot. I'm going to take a look-see. You mind the gun."

A STRING of horses, with riders ahead and behind, moved across the dun land to the eastward—the Retreat of Garza.

El Toro stood on the slope above the corral and watched. Two, three thousand dollars—hope, traveled along in that winding train. His eyes smoldered. Horses were just there in the corral, looking up at him. If there weren't wounded men——

"But ——," he argued, "what do I care for them? They're nothing to me. I'll ditch 'em."

Possession of the loot! The romance of the thing. Taking a town in a foreign country. Robbing it. A white man's trick! He shook himself loose from the spell and started at a trot for the stone headquarters building to see for himself what could be done with four men down on their backs.

Any minute Ocho might open fire. He began to double-time, with elbows in, as the army over there at Mariposa, that lay so serenely in the afternoon sun, had taught him to do.

Within the patio he paused by the door to look. Lined along one wall in the shade were four men on cots, as Fizzle had said. And the place had been looted. Small stuff was scattered about, beans spilled.

The quietness of that hollow square, as compared to the life and color, the fires and the dancing girl, of the night before, smote him.

One of the four men called out, using one of the few Mexican words el Toro could understand—*agua*, water.

El Toro sighed to the bottom of his lungs, the sigh of resignation, and went to the cot where the man lay, something deeper than his own human mind, something racial and of the spirit, holding him to the sense of duty.

The man spoke again.

"I'll stick," said el Toro.

And he looked and saw that the man was Juan—he of the big heart, called St. John.

Larkin looked about for water, but saw none. Undoubtedly it was in jars somewhere just out of sight. It were better to let Fizzle look after this.

He hurried out and back up the hill. As he went he realized more completely the quietness that hung over the town. It was ominous. It would not to do leave Fizzle alone again to stand off an attack.

"You go," he told Fizzle on reaching the nest, "and get them wounded a drink of water. They're calling for it."

He took his place at the gun, but Fizzle, instead of going, sat hugging his knees and rocking, his countenance miserable. It startled Larkin.

"You been shot, Fiz?" he demanded. "What you waiting for?"

"Lark," said Fizzle softly, with a sort of sorrowful affection, "we're up against it."

A change swept over Larkin.

"You've said it," he admitted. "What did the feller say that was about to be hung—close to the end of his rope?"

"Don't joke. Them watchmen the women showed us this morning, they been back with Ocho for hours. The watchmen we had on the east and south have gone off with Garza. It's you and me and four wounded men."

"Well, we're worth a dozen."

"I been thinking," went on Fizzle. "While you was away I carried all the gun-drums here and filled 'em, and I got in some more boxes of ammunition, and three of these big pistols, see?"

"Well?"

"Everything's ready to your hand. Me, I been thinking. I'm going back to Mariposa."

"What for? You got six years over there. If you feel like going why don't you get a horse and follow that other traitor, Garza?"

Pain flashed over Fizzle.

"No, no, lad," pleaded el Toro; "I didn't mean that. I got no right to ask you to stay here. Fact is, I advise you to beat it."

"I been thinking. I'm going to Mariposa for help."

"Help!" yelped Larkin. "Help, ——! We're outlaws, kid. No help for us. We're lone hands. All we got left is self-respect. If I'd go off and leave them wounded men I couldn't look a white guy in the eye from now till Christmas."

"Good-by, Lark."

"Get out o' here! Give them birds some water."

While Fizzle was getting water for the wounded, the quiet was broken by the expected attack. It came like a blast of wind. It put speed into Fizzle, and he hurried back to Larkin's side.

In the mean time things had happened to el Toro. A bullet had marked him deeply at the junction of shoulder and neck, and another had scored his scalp deeply. Gripping the gun to turn the muzzle here and there, the terrific vibration of the recoil that shook his whole body made blood quiver from the wounds. But the Bull kept grimly on.

"Listen," said Fizzle, close up. "I'm going to Mariposa for help."

His eyes shone with a thin, hard light.

"Yes, yes," said Larkin, "I don't blame you, kid."

"We been good pals, Lark. So-long."

"So-long, Fiz. Maybe I'll come along myself—right away. You beat it—while the beating's good."

THREE shots from the American side of the Rio Grande did not check Fizzle's determination to cross. He threw off his shoes and waded in. The swift channel of the yellow stream carried him down some distance before his toes dug

into the sand of the bottom of the northern shore. And there, when he waded out looking like a wet cat, three soldiers walked up to him inquiringly.

"I want to see Goggle-Eyes," said Fizzle. "Lieutenant Beam."

"Wot the deuce?" exclaimed the sergeant.

"Our own little yellow streak," put in a soldier.

"Goggle-Eyes," repeated Fizzle firmly.

"He's officer of the day," observed the sergeant, beginning to grin at the wet spectacle.

"Beam," persisted Fizzle with a certain imperativeness.

"Beam's the only one *to* see," one of the soldiers reminded him. "The other officers are at the pistol-range."

"He's the *only* one I want to see," said Fizzle, for he had what he considered a slick little scheme up his sleeve to play on that officer's weakness.

They trudged out of the sand to their horses, and when the sergeant was in his saddle he reached down and set the damp little man up behind him. Then they headed for the garrison.

The sergeant turned off at the edge of the drill-ground to intercept Lieutenant Beam as he strode in model fashion along officers' row. At the proper point the non-com. slid off his mount and saluted. Fizzle followed every movement correctly.

"Oh-ho!" sang out the officer. "Our little iggeldy-piggeldy man."

"Don't be silly," advised Fizzle gravely.

"Be careful," warned the officer. "I thought we were clear of you and that big Hottentot that broke the jail down and let you out."

"Nope. I'm here, and he's——"

"I'll wager a cigaret he's over there in jeopardy, or you wouldn't be here."

"You're wrong. He's in Alamos."

"Haw-haw-haw!" and "He-he-he!" went the soldiers.

"Don't laugh at ignorance," advised the lieutenant.

"Listen!" commanded Fizzle, and his attitude got them poised on their ears, so to speak.

He further staged his effect by pointing to Alamos with one hand and cupping behind the ear with the other. And listened—and heard a steady roar of rifle and machine-gun fire up on the mesa where the adobe houses huddled.

"One man," said Fizzle, looking Beam in the eye, "one—white—man—is up there fighting a pack o' aliens. One white man—Mr. Larkin himself. He's standing off a crool army to protect the wounded and helpless."

Fizzle's scheme worked. At the sound of "white man" Beam picked up interest. They crowded about him as he began the story. Two other men arrived, and out of the corner of an eye Fizzle saw three more trotting over to see what had turned up.

Fizzle began with the arrival of himself and *Mister* Larkin—he spread it on!—in Alamos. He told how they had fought the day before, about the horses and the women and the fighting through the entire day; of the threat of execution by a firing-squad, and the whipping.

Soldiers came and came and added to the crowd. Fizzle talked to them all. He kept raising his voice. He orated. And he ended with a grand climax of how Larkin was fighting there like a white man does when he's right.

'By Heavens!" cried Beam at the finish. "That's white-man stuff for you, sure enough!"

He took in the circle of faces, now numbering about twenty. And the men watched him breathlessly or breathing like bellows.

"Men," Beam burst out, "I'm going over there. I've got no right to——"

"Sure you have!" somebody shouted.

"I'm taking my commission in hand——"

"Hang that!"

"I've no right to order——"

"Can the orders!"

"But I'm going. Will six men volunteer to go along? If so, hold up your hands."

Twenty hands went up. Everybody shouted:

"I! Yo! Here! Me!"

Then Fizzle almost fainted from weariness and the exhaustion of the swim. Beam grabbed him. The sergeant got hold on the other side.

'Five or six of you men saddle," said the officer, "and bring my horse. To the squadron kitchen."

The officer and the sergeant half-dragged and walked Fizzle to the kitchen. There they made him drink hot coffee with plenty of cream and swallow some broth the cook heated quickly. The officer kept dancing around Fizzle like a red Indian, asking questions and exclaiming.

In about three minutes, just as Fizzle was getting started well with the broth, there was a racket of horses outside, and Beam dragged him out.

At least forty mounted men were milling around the kitchen door, all armed with rifles and pistols and extra bandoliers of cartridges. And at least as many more were in preparation. Fizzle could see them clear back to the picket-line, where some were still saddling.

"Five or six only," said Beam firmly.

An extra pistol was shoved into his hands, and one into Fizzle's. Fizzle was lifted to a saddle, and found his own horse between his knees.

"Bay Boy!" he whispered, bending down along the silky neck. "The reason I run that night was because I didn't want to get you shot, partly."

"Who volunteered here?" demanded the officer.

"Me! I!" shouted all of them.

"Ten men only," yelled Beam. "No more."

He swept out an arm and cut off the end ten. A groan went up. And all who had not been chosen turned their horses and galloped for the river.

But at the river the officer forbade them to go farther. He directed the ten to go across, and rode into the water himself alongside of Fizzle. The sergeant followed after them.

"You're doing an unlawful thing," said the sergeant to the lieutenant. "You can't make me stay back."

Beam halted them on the Mexican side for instructions.

"Stay scattered," he ordered. "Go in a skirmish line. We don't know what's up there. Keep your guns ready, and watch the guide."

He nodded to Fizzle, on ahead and restive. All at once Fizzle raised a hand.

"Listen!" he commanded.

He went white.

"The firing has stopped!" he jerked out. "Come on!"

They set out in a gallop, Beam jamming along beside Fizzle.

"Boy," shouted the officer above the racket, "I'm going to get you clear of that sentence!"

"I was going to muster up ginger to ask you," said Fizzle. "I ain't no coward, dang it! But I ain't no fightin' man either. I want you to get me into the hospital outfit."

"Sure! Anything you want. I'll get you a Congressional Medal."

"They's an iron kettle up here—" began Fizzle hopefully; but the officer drowned him out:

"Such white-man stuff! Such marked racial principles cropping out! Horses, women, wounded men!"

The skirmish line turned right oblique and headed for the trench, and in a moment the horses drew up along its bank. All was quiet on the slope below. Six or eight bodies lay scattered in the trench. Fizzle edged his horse down to the main pill-box.

"Why," he said, shocked, "why, Larkin ain't here!"

Fizzle guided his horse along the approach trench, looking into it, and on back of headquarters, past the execution wall, and around the corner by the hitch-rack, the others following. And there by the hitch-rack, just in front of the door, lay the Bull on his face in the dirt, with a big automatic in each hand and his arms and body and head all bloody.

In the same first flash they saw on beyond, in a row like potatoes dropped from a wagon, three Mexicans lying in grotesque heaps. The nearest one was small, as if it were Ocho himself.

Beam dragged off his campaign hat, and the others followed suit.

"He has conquered," said Beam. "Old Larkin has fought 'em off right up to the very door. God, what a star in the annals of the Anglo-Saxons!"

And then to their ut er astonishment the Bull turned over and sat up, trying unseeingly to work an empty gun.

"Who the blinkin'—" he began.

Fizzle slid from his horse almost on to Larkin.

"Me, Lark! It's me, Fizzle!"

He shook the huge form. Larkin, brightening, pulled away and hitched over to sit with back against the door, as if to keep out even these men.

"I run out o' drums," he said. "The whole gang jumped me."

Beam drove in enthusiastically. He seized Larkin by one hand with both of his and began to pump.

"Oh, but this is white-man stuff!" he raved. "I'll not prefer charges, Larkin. You're free. This is glo-r-r-r-i-ous!"

But Larkin scarcely heard. He was taking in little Fizzle with admiring eyes.

"So you went to Mariposa, hey?" he said. "You little Iron Pot!"

Beam ran around Fizzle and got Larkin by the other hand.

"This is great, great!" he gushed on. "Honor to the Anglo-Saxon race! White-man stuff!"

All at once Larkin grinned, and said whimsically:

"White-man nothing! The women left, the loot was stole, and the hooch wasn't nothing but lubricating-oil!"

BECAUSE we in the office made a slip in estimating the amount of material scheduled for this issue we came out short on space. Something had to give. So the semi-annual summary of all Lost Trails queries not yet answered had to be taken out of this number and be transferred to the issue of February 28th. I'm sorry, but mistakes do happen.

WE HEARD from Gordon MacCreagh while he was in the Amazon jungles with the Mulford Biological Expedition and now he's back, though I haven't seen him yet. Here's a letter he wrote on his way down. Instead of passing it on promptly to the printer as I should have done, since the element of timeliness was involved, I somehow let it get into the cache.

I haven't seen him yet, but hope to soon. Also I hope our Expedition committee will call him in consultation now that he's reachable again. By the way, our committee expects to meet this week and bring things to a head sufficiently to warrant reporting to you. The preliminary work and general survey of possibilities have naturally been slow and I haven't tried to dribble out to you what were only plans and intentions. Now things are beginning to shape up—and to shape up mighty well. Don't get any idea that, just because I haven't been talking about it, there's nothing doing.

As to what Gordon MacCreagh knows about snakes at first hand—real, prohibition snakes, you ought to hear Captain Dingle tell the story of a night he spent in Gordon MacCreagh's apartment—and of a bath he didn't quite take in the morning.

Caribbean Sea. (I don't know just where and I've forgotten the date).

I've just found time to read the last issue which I grabbed off the table on my way to the boat. Boat's name, by the way, is *Santa Lucia*, Grace line. All their boats are named after some saint or other—though I'm blamed if I can see why. Probably because they're so moral. This one might be a Methodist convention.

BUT that is mere persiflage. I'm writing to get into this long-standing argument about snakes—the hoop-snake story stirs me to action.

I've always stood out when the talk has waxed hot; but some of the stories surely have tempted providence. I've caught snakes—I mean collected them for scientific institutions—and I've traded in snakes, and I've doctored snakes, big fellows, when they had sore or "woolly mouth;" and, hang it all, I've even had a snake show; and I've had the temerity to write a monograph on "The Thanatophidia of the Malay Peninsula"—cribbed mostly from Fayrer's standard masterpiece; and, all in all, I've kinder tickled myself with the thought that I was a sort of embryo scientist.

About eighty-foot monsters, then. I've always agreed with my, er—colleagues in ophiology that there ain't no sech animile; or leastways, we hain't seen none. I would, none the less, hesitate to enter the field of argument even now except that I happen to be in a peculiarly favorable position to observe and record. This expedition proposes to explore

right into the home of the shrinking eighty-footers; the headwaters of the Beni River, Madero River, Amazon and Rio Negro; all of it wild and woolly and festering in the dim green heat of the under jungles. If there are eighty-foot reptiles they ought to be there. In fact, if I remember right, it is right in that district that they have been slain. On their trail will be a herpetologist and an ichthyologist and an entomologist and a herbologist and an ethnologist, all men of standing in various universities in the U. S. A. I can't give their names, because at the last moment there seems to be some upset in the personnel of the expedition and it is not definitely settled just who will come out. You must understand that I am going out two months in advance of the *other* scientists to make camp at La Paz in Bolivia and arrange there for mules and porters and rafts and grub and all the hundred and one other kinds of truck that an expedition needs.

NOW what I want to say is that if there are actually snakes of a size considerably in excess of such as are known to science—about thirty feet is the limit admitted—we surely ought to come across some sort of tangible evidence other than the stories of the up-river Indians. And if there should be any such evidence you can bet your last dollar that I shall come back with proof; that is to say, in addition to the testimony of the various ologists I shall have skins and a mass of photographs, still and motion. This expedition is going out supplied with a complete outfit of taxidermy tools and preservatives and quite the completest photographic outfit that has ever been taken into that country. So you may be sure that whatever is will be recorded.

I surely hope for an eighty-footer; particularly one with the hypnotic eye that lures a steam launch to the bank and then gobbles the crew; but I ain't sanguine.

WHILE I am on this subject let me unburden myself of some more controversy anent sarpints and their ways.

It doesn't seem ever to have been put forward by the pro and con writers to the Camp-Fire that a great deal of "evidence," while perfectly honestly vouched for, can not be accepted as fact for the reason that the narrator is not what science calls a "trained observer." He sees a snake in some unusual and startling position, and his fervid imagination supplies the details. We all have met the good farmer who swears as a matter of personal knowledge that black snakes sneak into the byres and suck cow's milk at night. The farmer is perfectly honest in his belief; he has seen the snake twined about the legs of his cow, and he knows that snakes like milk; obviously, then, it was sucking milk from his cow, which peacefully slumbered the while.

Fine. Incontestible first-hand evidence. But science smiles and points out that a snake's mouth, being composed of horny labial plates, instead of mobile lips, *can not* suck. Science does not therefore say that the good farmer lies; but suggests that, being an "untrained observer," he has not recorded facts. Science admits that it is quite possible, in fact probable, that a snake, attracted by the scent of milk from a cow's udder, may glide softly around and nose about for the source of the milk—for a snake's sense of scent is very keen; and in that position it is surprised by the farmer.

Is it not possible, then, that most of the astounding stories of personal experience with snakes may be explained in exactly the same manner?

There, that's off my chest.

I shall keep in touch as much as possible and shall send in a bulletin every now and then which may be of interest to brothers of the Camp-Fire.

And, I nearly forgot. Will you be good enough to make me out one of the identification-cards? I have never applied for one until now, though I have been very much in favor of the plan from its inception; only I have not needed one before.—GORDON MACCREAGH.

PLENTY of the younger ones are with us, comrade. Incidentally, you're two or three years older than when your letter came to our cache.

Albuquerque, New Mexico.

I think it is about time I chipped in the pot, and see what I'll draw, so I'll just break in on your old-timers. You see, I'm one of the "younger element," and it looks funny that only the old-timers seem to occupy seats around Camp-Fire. True, they are the ones to give us the information on the times that used to be; but what about the present days? Can any one stand up and say that there is no more adventure nowadays? I seem to find plenty of it, and if I could sling the ink like White or Churchill, I'd give you proof of it. You don't have to go far to find trouble, and, according to my opinion, adventure is based on trouble of some sort or chance.

Hey you of the Mexico "Light Brigade," how about a yarn from some of you? You know there was plenty of excitement there in 1916. Why don't some of you break loose? Surely, you haven't forgotten "Two-gun Turner" or "Big Pete" and the rest? Who'll give us the story of "The charge of light Brigade"?—P. W. KOSSAR ("Sixshooter Bill").

FRANK C. ROBERTSON rises to tell us something about the old sheep and cattle wars that figure in his story in this issue:

The talk about "different" stories gave me the idea that maybe the *Adventure* bunch would like to read a story of a range war as such wars actually happened. Not that this story pretends to be a "history" at all. It is purely fiction, but the settling duplicates that of many real fights. The point is that in all these scraps the same mood was there, and given the same circumstances the results would have been the same. Many and many a good man and many a bad one has "gone over the hump" in rows similar to this one.

I'VE tried hard to stress the one important fact that there was a certain amount of justification for both sides, and a whole lot of blame. If I have appeared to favor the sheepmen it is because it seemed necessary to stress their viewpoint for the sake of emphasis, and because in fiction they are always presumed to be in the wrong. They have

to get a little more than an even break to win any sympathy from the reader. Sheepmen were usually the aggressors in range crowding simply because cattle were there first. Cattle men were usually the aggressors in violence. As a rule the cattlemen won the fights, and the sheepmen won the range. And both sides were ruled by prejudice.

I HOPE I've been able to show that there were good qualities in all of the men involved except "*Dead-eye*" Bender and "*Pot-hook*." These two may seem overdrawn, but I really don't think they are. They had their prototypes in real life—moral perverts for whom hate made a place. There was the notorious Tom Horn, who was hanged in Wyoming a few years ago. If my memory serves he was known to have killed four men, and when you consider how easy it is to kill lonely men on the range without it being known it is a certainty that those four were a small per cent. of his total number. Then there was "Diamondfield Jack" Davis who was convicted of murder, and later acquitted. It is not for me to say that he was guilty, but he had a lot of powerful friends in his hour of need. Undoubtedly this doesn't exhaust the list, and there were plenty of sheps ready to take a shot at a passing cowboy if opportunity offered.

I state explicitly in the story that only a few cattlemen would have anything to do with such people, but there were a number on every range who became so bitter over what they thought was an infringment of their rights that they were ready to seize any weapon that came to their hand.

IF THE blame could be traced to its ultimate source a lot of it would fall on the free range policy of the Government, and a lot can be charged to local politics. In States like Montana and Wyoming the cattlemen wielded the larger influence, and sheepmen could not get a square deal. In Utah, Idaho, and Nevada just the reverse was true. Range wars practically stopped with the establishment of the Federal Forest Reserves.—FRANK C. ROBERTSON.

SOMETHING about South Sea pearling from J. Allan Dunn in connection with his story in this issue:

The story of Oku is reported, in somewhat niggardly fashion, by the Pearling Commission, held at Thursday Island in 1904.

It does not say where Oku hid the pearl, only that his brother dug it out of the gullet of the dead shark, where Oku had thrust it from his palm. There is where the story teller must clothe the skeleton of fact with flesh, imbue it with life and make men walk and talk and reason.

It is notorious that the captains of the pearling luggers of the Straits administered the law of the high and the low over their native crews and that injustice and cruelty were frequent.

There is no doubt but that the ordeal to which Oku was subjected had a peculiar appeal to the Kanakas owing to their own trials for guilt or innocence, almost as common in the South Seas as in South African kraals. Like the alligator in New Guinea, a shark was supposed to be an efficient arbiter in such matters with a nice discrimination between right and wrong.

Thursday Island is the smallest of the Torres Island group and is a fortified coaling station and port of call. It is part of the Australian division Queensland.—J. ALLAN DUNN.

AZTECS, Norsemen, Basques, Easter Island. Not in particular reference to the following letter (1921), I find it's well to repeat every so often that Camp-Fire is an open forum for all of us, that any one who interests us is gladly heard so far as space permits and that he can, within any reasonable limits, voice his opinion on any subject in our field, but that the magazine and its editors naturally do not endorse opinions given at Camp-Fire unless it is specifically stated. It isn't our business to pass on to you only those things we happen to believe ourselves and you'd be disgusted if we followed any such rule. I'm merely a toast-master or usher or something who introduces our speakers and lets them say *their* say. That's all plain enough to most of you, but not to some.

Creston, British Columbia.

There are some enquiries as to the Aztecs and other matters in the last issue by Mr. James C. McKay on which I may be able to be of assistance.

THE latest authorities, I think, are of opinion that America was colonized from India, Java and other places in the East. The remains in Central America are traced, as far as their architectural ancestry is concerned, to some temples in India. On one occasion I wrote to an authority on the subject and was told that it was most probable that the civilization of Central America came from Java.

The god Quetzal may have been a remembrance of a Norse-, not Nor-, man, as I have been informed by a friend who has traveled extensively on the Atlantic coast of Florida, Mexico and Central America that some of the place-names show Norse origin. The Norse men were a totally different race to the Normans. The latter were the result of a slight admixture of Nordman blood with the Gallo-Roman stock of northern France. They were to all intents and purposes French. They are aptly compared by Hilaire Belloc to one of those new stars that shine brilliantly for a short period and then disappear. The Normans are first heard of in history about the year 1000, and by 1160 are gone, but in their short career they had practically reorganized Christendom.

THE Basques. I, like your correspondence would like some information about the Basques. Beyond the fact that they were the basis of the reconquest of Spain and therefore of Europe from the Mohammedan invasion I know nothing about them.

W. H. H. Murray in one of his delightful books gives a hint that the Indians of this continent are descended from them, an idea he got from Ignatius

Donnelly's "Atlantis," but I don't believe there is much to say for that theory.

As to their being a branch of the Aryan Race, I think that the best authorities now say that there was no such thing.

AN OLD brother officer of mine, who had traveled widely in the South Pacific and who had done some little investigating, told me that the monuments on Easter Island were very like those in Central America and was of the opinion that they were both traceable to the same race.

Living where I do, I can not give chapter and verse for the information I have tried to give. There is no reference library here and my own is but small.—J. A. P. CRAMPTON.

THIS one from the cache brings up a subject concerning which we've had nothing from some time. The verdict as to a rabbit's ability in this line seems unanimous.

Walled Lake, Mich.

Was interested in W. C. Tuttle's remarks about the jackrabbit's not needing insides. Don't think they have anything on little old Mollie Cotton-Tail at that. Two of us shot eight times at one one day and it trotted over a hill. We went to see where it had gone and found the thing lying dead at the foot of a tree. When we dressed it I guess 90 per cent. of the shot had hit the darned thing. I have seen some of them carry enough lead to sink a canalboat for a hundred yards or more, then drop dead. All they need is one leg.—ALEX MILNE.

IT'S true that many readers write to our magazine and to Camp-Fire who are not in the habit of writing to magazines, perhaps never wrote to a magazine in all their lives. But I know that there are many even of our readers who never write to us. Not because they're not interested, but simply because they don't write letters unless they have to or are naturally not the kind to write criticism or praise to any magazine.

That's all right, of course. That's their own business and they're not in any way to be criticized for it. But here's another side of it. We in the office are trying hard to find out just how to make the magazine please you readers best and most, to learn just which authors and stories you like or dislike. Any editor can make a guess in a general way, but we don't want to depend on guessing. We want actual facts. Believe me, when we get the facts from you they are carefully noted and studied. More than any other magazine I've worked on or am familiar with we do get concrete, definite guidance from our readers. But, even so, we don't get enough. Every single time we try to draw conclusions from the criticisms our readers give us we are confronted with this disconcerting problem. "Yes, but there's the large class of readers who never write to any magazine. Differing from the others as to writing or not writing, likely they're different in some other respects and their opinions on given points might be quite different from the majority opinion of those who do help us with definite data. And naturally we don't know how many there are in this non-letter-writing class."

We just have to guess at their likes and dislikes. For all we know, we may be working hard to do just the things they don't want done. Nor can we ever be quite sure that we have on any point what is really the majority opinion.

YOU who don't write to any magazines, why not treat yourself to an adventure by doing so? We publish more letters of criticism than we do of praise, but mighty few of either, and in any case the simple words "don't print" will ensure your letter's not being published; if that part of it worries you any. We don't make any use of names and addresses thus secured nor do we permit others to do so. It's just a simple matter of telling the magazine what you like or dislike in it—so that we can make it more along the lines you like.

We know that many of this very class *are* opening up and telling us things—lots of letters state that the writers never wrote to a magazine before. But we want to hear from still more of you—from all of you. We don't care how hastily it's scrawled. It's the facts of your opinions we want. You can dress 'em up to suit your own convenience or leave 'em naked. Address L. B. Barretto, or me, or just the magazine, or any of us.

Why not take a shot at it if for no other reason than that you've never done it before?

SOMETHING from Barry Scobee in connection with his story in this issue:

Bellingham, Wash.

Once in and around the Big Bend of Texas there was a story going that two American soldiers had escaped from the cavalry guard-house at Presidio, Texas, on the Rio Grande, and crossed the river into Ojinaga, where a fight was imminent, or in progress, between two Mexican factions. The story had it that the two deserters, or escaped prisoners, manned machine-guns for the force inside the little adobe town and fought until they were killed, and when found—the Mexican force inside having deserted them, and the force outside being whipped—were

buried in the heaps of empty cartridges ejected from their guns.

How much of this was fact I did not learn. Another version had it that one was killed and that the other returned to the Texas side. But the yarn seemed to be consistent that a pair of Americans had shown unusual—or may I say usual—courage. It was this that formed the basis of the story. The most interesting fiction field, to me, is the Anglo-Saxon race—BARRY SCOBEE.

THERE'S a lot in what this comrade says about camping out right in the heart of civilization. It's not the best, but it's surprizingly better than nothing. At least outdoors is outdoors.

Dayton, Ohio.

I want to sit in at Camp-Fire for just a little and have my say as one of the very oldest members of that most interesting group. I know there is no older member than I am because I have read every number since it was started—have not missed one. How is that for a record?

There have been numerous occasions when I have been tempted to "spiel" a little at the Camp-Fire but have not done so because there are so many with much more worth-while tales to tell than anything that I might have to offer and my small list of "adventures" (?) appears very commonplace beside some of those we do hear.

Started out as a kid of about 13, and my first adventure was a trip to sea in the old ship *Sunrise*, and if there are any old-timers who remember her rep. as a "hell-ship" they can imagine the rest of the story. I might go on and tell of her last great adventure after she was cut down for a coal barge and was sunk just inside the Delaware Capes, taking down all hands except the engineer, but that is too long a story and is only interesting to me—who was in at the death.

After that first trip, life was rather commonplace for several years, cluttered up with a lot of hard work and some small excitements, nothing much to speak about, such things as getting held up and robbed in some of the Mediterranean ports, and other things of like character that are common to the life of a sailor. Got into "steam" after a bit and finally got my "chief's" license and had charge for a while and then quit and got married and had to settle down ashore to satisfy the Missus. Last trip I ever took was one Summer when I took the Missus along for a vacation, and we sure had a lot of fun. Was sorry to come ashore and settle down.

Have had more or less of hunting, fishing and camping since then and have enjoyed some rather unusual experiences along those lines as most of these trips have been right in the heart of civilization, and I'll tell a man he can get a lot of fun and adventure in camping out within a couple of miles of a big city if you go about it right. (The Missus says, "That is sure so." She always goes along.) I have often wondered why some one didn't write up the possibilities of such vacations and give more people an idea of the chances therein. I've had a lot of fun and some mild adventures doing that very thing and would recommend it to those adventurous spirits who can not roam far from their "ain fireside."

Knew Col. Cody for some few years and have had the pleasure of hearing of some of his experiences at first hand. Saw him last in Kenosha, Wis., when he was with the Forepaugh & Sells circus putting on a Wild West act with that outfit. He was badly broken in health and died not very long after. Knew Johnny Baker and Annie Oakley when they were with the Col. at the heyday of his Wild West show. Remember a notable Fourth of July dinner the Col. gave his bunch in Syracuse, N. Y., and I had the pleasure of being his guest. They sure did "whoop 'er up" at that dinner and then gave a performance that afternoon.

Camp-Fire is sure a live bunch of buddies that congregate there. Occasionally see a name that I know and wish I could meet up with the owner of the same. *Adios.*—E. M. P.

OUR Camp-Fire Stations are spreading steadily over the map. Help make them grow.

A STATION may be in any shop, home or other reputable place. The only requirements are that a Station shall display the regular Station sign, provide a box or drawer for mail to be called for and preserve the register book.

No responsibility for mail is assumed by anybody; the Station merely uses ordinary care. Entries in register to be confined to name or serial number, route, destination, permanent address and such other brief notes or remarks as desired; each Station can impose its own limit on space to be used. Registers become permanent property of Station; signs remain property of this magazine, so that if there is due cause of complaint from members a Station can be discontinued by withdrawing sign.

A Station bulletin board is strongly to be recommended as almost necessary. On it travelers can leave tips as to conditions of trails, etc., resident members can post their names and addresses, such hospitality as they care to offer, calls for any travelers who are familiar with countries these residents once knew, calls for particular men if they happen that way, etc., notices or tips about local facilities and conditions. Letters to resident members can be posted on this bulletin-board.

Any one who wishes is a member of Camp-Fire and therefore entitled to the above Station privileges subject to the Keeper's discretion. Those offering hospitality of any kind do so on their own responsibility and at their own risk and can therefore make any discriminations they see fit. Traveling members will naturally be expected to remember that they are merely guests and act accordingly.

Keepers answer letters only if they wish. For local information write "Ask Adventure."

A Station may offer only the required register and mail facilities or enlarge its scope to any degree it pleases. Its possibilities as headquarters for a local club of resident Camp-Fire members are excellent.

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QUESTIONS should be sent, not to this office, but direct to the expert in charge of the section in whose field it falls. So that service may be as prompt as possible, he will answer you by mail direct. But he will also send to us a copy of each question and answer, and from these we shall select those of most general interest and publish them each issue in this department, thus making it itself an exceedingly valuable standing source of practical information. Unless otherwise requested inquirer's name and town are printed with question; street numbers not given.

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Our experts will in all cases answer to the best of their ability, using their own discretion in all matters pertaining to their sections, subject only to our general rules for "Ask Adventure," but neither they nor the magazine assumes any responsibility beyond the moral one of trying to do the best that is possible. These experts have been chosen by us not only for their knowledge and experience but with an eye to their integrity and reliability. We have emphatically assured each of them that his advice or information is not to be affected in any way by whether a given commodity is or is not advertised in this magazine.

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2. **Send each question direct to the expert in charge of the particular section whose field covers it. He will reply by mail. Do NOT send questions to this magazine.**
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For general information on U. S. and its possessions, write Supt. of Public Documents, Wash., D. C., for catalog of all Government publications.

For the Philippines, Porto Rico, and customs receiverships in Santo Domingo and Haiti, the Bureau of Insular Affairs, War Dept., Wash., D. C.

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For Hawaii, Hawaii Promotion Committee, Chamber of Commerce, Honolulu, T. H. Also, Dept. of the Interior, Wash, D. C.

For Cuba, Bureau of Information, Dept. of Agri., Com. and Labor, Havana, Cuba.

The Pan-American Union may be called upon for general information relating to Latin-American matters or for specific data. Address L. S. ROWE, Dir. Gen., Wash., D. C.

For R. C. M. P., Commissioner Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Ottawa, Can. Only unmarried British subjects, age 18 to 40, above 5 ft. 8 in. and under 175 lbs.

For Canal Zone, the Panama Canal Com., Wash., D. C.

For U. S., its possessions and most foreign countries, the Dept. of Com., Wash., D. C.

United States Revolver Ass'n. W. A. MORRALL, Sec'y-Treas., Hotel Virginia, Columbus, O.

All inquiries for information regarding the national parks, how to get there and what to do when you get there, should be addressed to the National Park Service, Washington, D. C.

Arctic Foxes

ALSO trapping as it is practised under the aurora borealis:

Question:—"Will you kindly give me some information regarding the white and blue foxes of the arctic regions?

Do the blue foxes deteriorate in captivity like the black fox, or do they breed true? And what is the approximate value of their pelts?

How are they trapped by the natives, and how do the white men trap them? Are they plentiful on the Greenland coast?

Are there any on Spitzbergen?

I am now getting out of your territory, which you no doubt will pardon; but there is none other to write to for information on Spitzbergen. Hence if you have any hint regarding Spitzbergen, then throw it in, as I will greatly appreciate any and all information that you may be able to give me.

Please omit my name if you print this letter."—— ——, West Brighton, S. I., N. Y.

Answer, by Mr. Shaw:—You use the word "deteriorate" in reference to arctic foxes in captivity: if by that you mean thrive in a physical way, my reply is, "Yes."

If, however, you are under the impression that the blue fox is—like the black variety—a freak of nature, and thus likely to revert to some other type, the answer is, "No."

Both the white or arctic fox, and the blue variety are distinct breeds; two varieties of the same genus, fox. Nor does either variety have seasonal color changes, as do many animals and birds of the snow countries. Neither the bear, wolf, fox, nor arctic hare changes the color of the pelage Summer or Winter.

Both the white and blue fox range from about 65 N. lat. as far toward the pole as land extends, though Peary saw them at 85-86 north far out on the "paleozoic" floes of the arctic sea. This range covers all land south of 90 north latitude—Greenland, Iceland, Spitzbergen, Franz Joseph Land, Alaska, Bering, northern Siberia, etc.

They are quite plentiful in all these localities or

wherever the ermine, lemming, and the ptarmigan are found. In northern Greenland they are found only along the coast in any numbers, for the interior is covered by the great ice-cap.

There is no distinct southern limit to this range; they are found on the northern mainland of the N. A. continent, in northern Labrador, along Coronation Gulf, around the Mackenzie delta, etc., although in less numbers.

Eskimo catch them in crude snares of rawhide seal, or shoot them with arrows—or with guns in more favored cases. In the far north they are not especially hard to trap; not nearly so much so, in my own opinion, as our red variety. The red fox has grown wise through generations of contact with man.

One of the simplest methods of trapping them is to plant a selected spot, which has a thin crust of snow, with some meat bait or lard balls. Get them coming to this bait. Then scrape away the snow beneath the crust under the baited spot and set your trap, or traps, there. They will come unafraid, if you have made but one set of tracks pointing the same way and some six or eight feet from your "set."

Or you can bait any spot the same way, and then fix several lard balls with strychnin. In the latter case, however, you must visit your "set" more often and be prepared to walk the trail of your poisoned fox and to skin him as soon as possible.

I am out of touch with the fur market since the war, but you can get quotations from any of the many fur dealers in N. Y. The price is much lower than the silver gray or the black or even the cross fox, because even the blue fox is too plentiful and comparatively easy to obtain.

A blue-fox "farm" was attempted some years ago on one of the northerly islands of southeastern Alaska. It did not prove successful because the animals do not thrive away from their natural habitat.

Both the white and the blue fox breed true. I do not know of any cases of cross-breeding between these two varieties, in the natural state or otherwise.

The full statement of the sections, as given in this issue, is printed only in alternate issues.

Recent Disasters in Guatemala

A COUNTRY as rich as this little neighbor of ours can probably stand a few earthquakes, with pestilence hither and yon, and still be unafraid:

Question:—"Am interested in Guatemala and would greatly appreciate any information you may be able to give me. I want to go inland on some navigable stream and buy about seven hundred and fifty or one thousand acres of tillable land. Could I grow the long staple or Peruvian cotton on this land until I could bring coconut-palms to bearing? What is the principal seaport? What are market conditions? Could I sell cotton or other produce?

In your answer to Mr. Hansen you placed cotton and coffee land in Class C, while land for cattle-raising comes in Class A. Would that mean that I would be unable to combine cotton, coffee, cattle and coconuts?

Could you give me the name and address of some American rancher in Guatemala?

About what would labor cost—native labor?

Do you think one could start something of this kind—say five hundred acres of cotton and fifty or one hundred of coconuts or bananas for one thousand five hundred or two thousand dollars, buy outfit and pay labor until cotton began to bear? Or would it be better to go down and work for some rancher until I found what I wanted?

Would I be able to get detail map of the country, and where?"—Tom Brooks, Robstown, Tex.

Answer, by Mr. Emerson:—The general economic upheaval caused by the World War was accentuated in Guatemala by earthquakes and fever plagues. On Dec. 25th, 1917, the city of Guatemala was severely shaken by earthquakes. This was the first of a series of seismic disturbances of greater or less intensity occurring almost daily until January 24th, 1918, when a still heavier shock practically finished the work of destruction. Business was at a standstill except for the most pressing work of reconstruction and of alleviating suffering, and of supplying the first necessities of life.

The estimated property loss was $30,000,000 in buildings and personal effects.

In April, 1918, an epidemic of yellow fever broke out in the smaller towns of the Pacific slope, and later in the same year there appeared a severe epidemic of Spanish influenza. The American Health Service cooperated with that of the Guatemala Government, and by the end of the year the yellow fever was entirely eradicated and the influenza well under control.

Coconuts require much experience and a climate that is no fit place for a white man to live; it cost the United Fruit Co. several fortunes and many lives before they were able to swing the deal as they are doing at this date. They now own coconut-groves, sugar-mills and railways to such an extent that you'd have to ask their permission to do many things in the large territory under their control.

You might write to Dr. Wm. C. Robertson, Galeras, Olancho District, Honduras, C. A. (enclosing United States 2c stamps, *not* a coupon) and he might be able to tell you of anything that is now available on the market.

I personally would not undertake to do what you propose unless I had had much experience in the lines mentioned and $25,000 as my capital.

Guatemala is a coffee outfit, mostly owned and controlled by Germans and German capital, and the coffee is contracted two or three years ahead for export to Germany exclusively.

The 1,500 plantations under cultivation cover an area of ninety-six million square yards and containing some 450,000,000 coffee-trees. The quantity produced in 1918 was 110,000,000 pounds.

Next to coffee, sugar is the most important crop; the yield, same year, was 42,000,000 pounds. Other crops were 9,351,485 bunches of plantains and bananas; also 6,110,900 quintals of maize (a quintal is about 100 pounds); 180,000 quintals of beans; 344,041 quintals of wheat; 135,547 quintals of rice; 248,000 quintals of potatoes. Cotton is grown in small quantities.

As to the local market at present writing, I have no exact data, as cotton in Guatemala is a small item.

The principal sea-port on Atlantic side is Puerto Barrios.

Get Rand McNally's Pocket Map of Central America, 35 cents, and you will see just how the land is located.

Write to United Fruit Co., New Orleans, asking for sailing-dates, freight and passenger rates, passports, etc. I think it is every Thursday for Puerto Barrios, from New Orleans.

Learning the Radio Game

A RELATIVELY new vocation by means of which a man may see the world as readily as railroad work enabled the "boomer" of years past to wander over the countries of the Americas:

Question:—"I would like some information on getting a position on board ship as wireless telegrapher.

Can a person ship as assistant and get practical training, or must I attend some school?

You understand of course that I know nothing about wireless at all.

I have put in a hitch in the Navy, but not in radio work.

Any information you can give me as to where I could learn telegraphy, points at which to apply for a job and all information you think might help me will be greatly appreciated."—JOSEPH K. GEIBEL, Chesapeake, O.

Answer, by Mr. McNicol:—A billet as radio operator on shipboard is both a pleasant and a profitable way to see the world. One radio operator who keeps in touch with the writer has within the past year and a half forwarded souvenir post-cards from seaports of seventeen different foreign countries.

In order to get a place as radio man aboardship it is necessary to learn to signal by means of the Continental code and to pass an examination for the grade of first or second class operator.

You could probably learn the code in about six months, provided you set aside two hours each day for practise.

The Radio Corporation of America, which places operators on ships on the Atlantic, the Pacific and the Great Lakes, has training-schools at New York and San Francisco. There also is a school at Cleveland, Ohio, which is perhaps closer to your town. At these schools there is a tuition fee. If you desire further information regarding these schools and the fees I shall upon request send it along.

Is there not in your vicinity a radio bug or two who have amateur outfits and with whom you can get acquainted for the purpose of learning the game? Radio bugs usually are to be found where you observe elevated antenna wires suspended between poles or trees. At present the whole country seems to be dotted with radio antennas, and although but one in five of those chaps has a sending outfit it may be that in your neighborhood one or more are located.

See if you can spot one, and write again after you have made some headway.

Maori War-Cries

THEY appear on the regimental badges of the New Zealand army:

Question:—"I enclose a list of the Maori mottoes borne by New Zealand regiments. Would you be so kind as to send me the English translation?

I am a collector of military badges of the British Empire and have a fairly large collection—nearly 3,000, all different; part of my collection, including some 120 New Zealand badges, is on loan for exhibition in the Glasgow Municipal Museum."—PHILIPPE DURAND, Cathcart, Glasgow, Scotland.

Answer, by Mr. Mills:—That is surely some hobby that you have gone in for as a collector, and it is a pleasure to help you along with some translations. I shall be pleased to do what I can for your collection in the way of translations from this end. The aborigines of New Zealand were essentially warriors, and their war-cries are well suited for regimental badges.

Please understand that the translations I am giving are as near to the sentiment of the cry as possible. Authorities might differ on the literal translation of each word. But it would be mere tweedledee *vs.* tweedledumism.

2nd Wellington-West Coast Mounted Rifles—*Ake ake, kia kaha.* Be strong forevermore! Ever, ever, be strong!

3rd Auckland Mounted Rifles—*Te Kaahu Mataare.* The watchful hawk.

11th North Auckland Mounted Rifles—*Kia Tupato!* Be on your guard!

6th Hauraki Regiment (this is the one with which my son served on Gallipoli)—*Whaka tangata—kia kaha!* Play the man—be strong!

8th Southland Regiment—*Kia Mate Toa!* Die hard, warrior!

13th North Canterbury-Westland Regiment—*Kia pono tonu!* Be ever faithful!

14th South Otago Regiment—*Kia kaha ake!* Be strong evermore!

9th Hawke's Bay Regiment—*Kia toa!* Be bold! Or, be brave!

16th Waikato Regiment—*Ka Whawhai tonu ake ake!* We will fight on for ever and ever!

General motto, but really a welfare courtesy—*Kia Ora!* Let there be health! Or, good luck!

Training a Pup to Come to Call

MR. LIEBE has not promised to answer such questions as the subjoined; but, like other "A. A." men, when he is able to pass along information as a matter of incidental knowledge he is always willing to do so, even though it doesn't happen to fall into his own particular self-determined field:

Question:—"Perhaps my question does not come under your department of 'Ask Adventure;' but can you give me any information as to the training of a pointer puppy for partridge hunting?

My greatest difficulty is in making him come to call. He minds well enough in other lines, and if I can overcome this difficulty I think I will be O. K."—H. G. LANGDON, Columbus, Ga.

Answer, by Mr. Liebe:—Your question is not strictly within my territory of the "Ask Adventure" service, but I'll do all I can. If it doesn't work out all right, would suggest your writing some such magazine as *Recreation* or *Field and Stream*.

So the puppy doesn't like to come to call. Probably too intent on his work! In this case he is promising, and I'd be careful with him. Try keeping him out of the field for a week or so, then take him out and don't let him get far away until you call him—and make him come, though don't shoot him (as lots of hunters would do; it ruins many a good dog, especially puppies; makes them gun-shy). A little switch sometimes helps. Give him to understand that he's *got* to come to you when you want him. Work him sort of by degrees.

If this doesn't work, maybe it's because the dog is too accustomed to you, if you get what I'm trying to say, or maybe a little spoiled. In this case the thing to do is to let somebody else have him for training until he sort of forgets you, and then take him back in hand.

Shooting a dog at some distance with fine shot is helpful sometimes for old dogs that get unruly, but I never could do it. I'm for the dogs, every time.

I had a dog once that was a wonder until he found a rabbit. That busted him all up. I thought I'd never break him of rabbits until a fellow hunter told me one day to shoot a rabbit, tie it about the dog's neck and make him carry it all day. I did, and it worked like a charm. You might remember that. That dog had no more use for a rabbit after that than the devil has for holy water.

You know, of course, that when they're young is the time to train them.

If you want an answer, read the rules.

The 2-Em Dashedest Hole for Flies

A KNOCK for one section of Canada, and a boost for another:

Question:—"My friend and myself would like a Winter's outing some place where we can be by ourselves, and in a country where there is quite a bit of game. We want to find a place where there is lots of hunting, trapping and fishing. Where we could go to in the Summer and put up a cabin, and learn the lay of the land before the snows came.

We are set on northern or central Alberta, and would like to know where you think it would be best for us to locate, also a description of the country around about, and how far it is to the nearest railroad. The farther the better, for if we like it and can make both ends meet we expect to stay there.

We have been planning on this ever since we joined the Army. We are from the West and the Southwest, but have never been North or Northwest, so we want to give it a trial. We had in mind some place about fifty miles west of McMurry in the hills, or around Lake Athabaska, but it makes no difference just so there is hunting, trapping and fishing. How much farther north is Lake Athabaska than McMurry?"—A. R. Bever, A. P. O. 227, A. F. in Germany.

Answer, by Mr. Carson:—I fail to see any good reason for sending you into the forsaken region northwest of McMurray. So far as game is concerned it is not too bad; but the fur has been pretty well trapped out, and the general lay of the country is rotten. It is positively one of the ——est holes for flies in the world, and travel in Summer is arduous, to say the least.

The distance from McMurray to Fort Chippewyan on Lake Athabaska is about 190 miles.

Now go ahead if you want to. There is sure a place to get near to Nature's heart, but——

By going to Fort Wrangel on the coast and going up the Stikine River in British Columbia you will find a primitive settlement at Telegraph Creek far from anything that remotely resembles a railway. You can get everything here you require in the line of outfit. The climate is not bad even in Winter, and the hunting and trapping are the best I know of anywhere. The fishing is wonderful, and as the district is more or less mineralized you can vary your Summer outings by taking an occasional prospecting-trip.

Should you wish to make a permanency of it you could locate a claim and homestead it. The land does not amount to anything so far as agriculture is concerned, but you would have a permanent base that would cost you practically nothing. By erecting a log house or cabin you could be very comfortable, and as it will probably be years before this country is even discovered except by the big-game hunters I would respectfully suggest the Stikine for yours.

Write Deputy Minister of Lands, Victoria, B. C., for a map and information *re* the northern interior of British Columbia.

Using the Bolt Action Left-Handed

HERE'S a little supplementary information from a letter friend:

Chicago, Ill.

Dear Mr. Wiggins:

I notice a question in June 20, 1922, *Adventure* in which among other things Mr. Lopez of Brooklyn, N. Y., asks in regard to left-hand bolt action. First though I'll apologize for butting in on your business, but I thought possibly you might not have seen left-handed operation of a bolt gun. It is really very simple, and is, I believe, as fast, or nearly so, as right-hand operation. It also gives greater leverage for primary extraction in rapid fire.

I use the little finger of the left hand and hook it around the bolt handle, yank up and back, at the same time throwing the head to the right (the opposite from right hand R. F. where you throw head to left). I speak of rapid fire because a person usually keeps the piece at the shoulder then.

I note Mr. Lopez says he is right-handed; but the change to left-hand manipulation is easy and well worth while in my estimation. I have never tried it on a Savage rifle, but can do pretty well on Krag, Springfield 1903, Mauser and Mannlicher. I did hardly believe it was possible until a corporal of engineers, U. S. A. showed me at Ft. Sheridan last year. He shot left-handed and sure could work the action fast.

By the way, apropos of quick draw with the S. A. Colt. A friend of mine uses a .45 S. A. 7½-inch. Monkeyed with the trigger pull till a touch would drop the hammer; in fact it hardly stayed cocked; about one-pound pull. He used to cock the gun in the holster, then pull it out and pull trigger. Fast, too.

Well, he tried that out at Ft. Sheridan range;

gun went off in holster and bullet went into his leg. Entrance just above and exit just below knee. Did not smash any bone, though; just a flesh wound. Got off easy. Now he's going to try some other method.

In case you'd like to know I use a S. A. .45 5½ and .38-40 5½ Bisley. My brother uses 5¼-inch .45 N. S. Colt. We're partial to the shotguns.

Hope you'll excuse this scrawl. Just thought I'd write on the chance some of this might be of interest.—L. H. ANDERSON.

To this Bro. Wiggins replied as follows:

I appreciate your thoughtfulness very much indeed. I am glad to have this, and will pass it along to the editor in hopes he'll print it, as it will be of interest to those of the readers who like to use the bolt action left-handed. A similar article appeared in *Arms and the Man* recently in regard to a shooter who had lost the sight of his right eye and devised a means of using the thumb of the left hand to manipulate the bolt.

In regard to your friend with the hair-trigger Colt, I can't feel very sorry for him. A man should know more than to put a cocked revolver in a holster, but he was very fortunate that he did not have a stiffened knee for life.

I use .45s and .44s with 5-inch to 8-inch barrels, but prefer the shorter lengths, as do you.—DONEGAN WIGGINS.

The Island Shameen

AN OCCIDENTAL dot in the immensity of Chinese life:

Question:—"Would it be possible for two white men to live in the native quarters of some large Chinese city, Canton preferred?

Is this done by any white people other than the worst or lowest types?

If possible, what would be the average monthly expense for food and lodging, say for two white men?

Would a person with only high-school education have much opportunity to get in with any firm or at any employment?

Any information on above will be deeply appreciated.

If this goes to *Adventure* please don't mention my name."—— ——, Terre Haute, Ind.

Answer, by Mr. Halton:—I am sorry that it would be quite impossible for two white men to live in the native city of Canton, nor do I think that they would want to if they ever got a peep into life in the native cities.

The white people doing business with Canton merchants live on an island called Shameen, half of which is owned by Great Britain and the other half by France. The American firms such as the Standard Oil have their offices on the British section, as also are the offices of the American Consul.

There are no hotels in the native city for white people, and unless you propose to live as the Chinese do there is nothing that you could obtain there which would appeal to a white man in his daily life.

Unless you are highly specialized in some branch of work it would not be possible to secure employment anywhere in China, as the Chinese fill all positions not requiring highly trained white labor.

Sorry I can not be more encouraging.

When you get something for nothing, don't make the other fellow pay the postage on it.

THE TRAIL AHEAD

FEBRUARY 20TH ISSUE

Besides the new serial and the three complete novelettes mentioned on the second page of this issue, the next *Adventure* will bring you the following stories:

THE SUPERCARGO — ***J. D. Newsom***
Milder-Smith goes on a "black-birding" expedition.

SEA HORROR Pirate Tales from the Law—Blackbeard — ***Arthur M. Harris***
Gallows-birds come home to roost.

A DEATH FIGHT — ***William Wells***
Indian guile matches itself against a cowboy's courage.

KEGHEAD—OUTLAW — ***John Adams Whitehead***
Hatred overcomes fear in a horse's heart.

CAT-O'-MOUNTAIN A Four-Part Story Conclusion — ***Arthur O. Friel***
"I got him!" screamed *Steve*. "Both barrils! *Yeeeow!*"

RANSOM An Incident in the Affairs of Mohamed Ali — ***George E. Holt***
When a clever man appears foolish, beware!

WHEN THE RIVER FROZE — ***Arthur A. Boyd***
Digging one's own grave is unpleasant work.

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